

# It's nearly game time for spring planting and how will it go?

## BYCHARLEY PREUSSER

It's like that nervous moment of anticipation before the big game starts—it's early April, and the farmers are getting ready to plant.

Is the equipment ready? Are the inputs purchased? What are the soil conditions and what will the weather be like this year? We're about to find out the answers to those questions and many more.

Maybe the best place to start is last year. Dry weather arrived with the harvest, and that probably helped assure access to fields was easy and the crop was harvested well. However, it was very dry in September and October.

Overall, local growers in Crawford County were happy with both the size of the yields and the quality of last year's crops.

Todd Vesbach and his family grow a couple of thousand acres of corn and soybeans on land they own and rent in Crawford and Vernon counties. Vesbach rated his corn harvest yield last year was about average and the soybean yield as above average. The quality of both was good.

"The soybeans had pretty good yields actually," Ferryville-area grower Swede Knutson said of last year's crop. "The corn yield was alright, but nothing special."

Like Vesbach, Knutson

has a lot of the crop still stored on the farm.

"I stored most of it," Knutson said. In fact, he still has about 75 percent of the crop and is getting ready to ship it.

Vesbach has over half the crop stored and only about half of that sold. Knutson also has some of his crop unsold at this point.

Both growers may be in an enviable position when it comes to the unsold crop. Three analysts appearing on the Iowa Public Television program Market-to-Market recently predicted a late-spring/early summer price spike for corn. The current range for a bushel of corn is between \$6.50 and \$7 per bushel. Current tight supplies are expected to keep the price high and possibly send it higher.

The Market-to-Market analysts noted that while the amount of stored corn is down 20 percent overall from a year ago, that's largely from the commercially held corn. Corn stocks still held by producers remain high.

### Barge shipping a factor

One reason producers may have more corn and soybeans stored than usual could be due to barge shipping delays in the Lower Mississippi River. The delays impacted the amount that could be shipped to the Gulf. Barges to the gulf are

a preferred shipping method and destination for local growers.

Despite the slowdown in barge traffic due to low water caused by a Western drought, grain continued to be shipped into the Gulf. There was just less of it, moving more slowly and at higher costs. And, other methods of shipping and destinations were utilized.

"Eventually, it will move," explained Chris Olson from Olson Feeds in Seneca. "It can be shipped by rail or truck. And, there's a lot more storage in the northern states than there used to be."

Vesbach sold some corn and soybeans to United Coop that was shipped from their terminal in Boscobel by rail.

Gavilon, the local barge shipper in Prairie du Chien, changed hands lately and the new owner Viterra is taking corn for shipment now.

In an interesting turn of events, the barges that once brought coal up to electrical power plants have been converted into hauling fertilizers and other commodities up the river in place of the coal that is no longer being burned. Coal burning power plants at Cassville and Genoa no longer exist.

Demand for ethanol

Of course another destination for the corn locally

was nearby ethanol plants, which were processing a lot into fuel with the higher gasoline prices.

Well that was last year's crop and except for some inconvenience and higher costs in barge shipping it was a great crop, which sold at a high price.

### Spring planting

Like Vesbach, Knutson will plant about even amounts of corn and soybeans (800 acres of each).

However, Swede is again growing 150 acres of wheat, as he did last year. The local grower likes wheat in the rotation and likes what it does for the soil.

Well what about this year? Let's start with the good news. Any fear of the fall drought extending into the spring in Wisconsin seems to have disappeared.

"It's moist right now," said Carolyn Ihde, the UW-Extension Ag Agent for Crawford and Richland counties. Ihde made her observation after seeing moisture in the soil cores she was taking in local pastures.

"It's not overly wet and lower soils may still need to be recharged, but the drought monitor is all good," Ihde said. "There's no drought in Wisconsin right now."

Both local growers agreed with Ihde that the soil appeared to have adequate moisture in it now.

Southwest Wisconsin re-

ported topsoil moisture as 71 percent adequate and 29 percent surplus, while the State of Wisconsin reported 55 percent adequate and 45 percent surplus, according to a recent USDA NASS Crop Report.

Chris Olson agreed the area had adequate moisture in the soil going into the planting season.

"What we need is a nice warm rain to warm the soil and get the frost out," Olson said.

Olson, like others, is aware that growers will try to plant soybeans much earlier than they have in the past, based on research from University of Wisconsin and elsewhere that early planting can lead to larger yields.

Sam Bibby, the new ag agent for Vernon, Juneau and Sauk counties said there is even talk of switching to planting soybeans before corn, which sets the traditional model on its head.

Will Fulwider, the UW-Extension Ag Agent for Dane and Dodge counties, is also seeing earlier planting of soybeans in his area as producers follow the latest advice in search of greater yields. Fulwider said RMA crop insurance dates for soybean planting had been moved up to April 15 to accommodate the earlier planting.

The ag agent explained that experience indicated

early planted soybeans tended to survive cold soil temperatures better than early planted corn.

Olson and others mentioned there are new soybean hybrids being developed for early planting.

Input costs decreasing Olson was also pretty positive on other conditions going into the season. He noted that input costs for fertilizer and herbicide were going down.

However, an analyst on Market-to-Market explained that many farmers and medium-sized ag product distributors remain saddled with the higher cost inputs that they purchased earlier. He noted that only larger buyers getting barge loads or other large amounts of fertilizer were seeing the lower input prices now.

As for this year, Olson noted that farmers are upbeat about the commodity prices and the growing conditions, as they approach another season.

"You have to remember that farmers are very much optimistic people," Olson said.

As if to prove Olson's point, Vesbach offered this upbeat assessment of the situation.

"We're looking for a good year coming to us," Todd Vesbach said.

Okay, let's play ball—it's game time.

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