

Corn Drydown Over Winter

Corn moistures at harvest have been quite variable this year. Growers have found a moisture range of 20% moisture corn to 40% moisture. At this point, much of the dryer corn has been harvested and now there is a conundrum over how to handle the wetter corn; much of which is above 30% moisture. There are many growers that are considering leaving the corn in the field until next spring to combine it. Last year, this tactic was fairly successful. When the growers went to combine, they found much of the corn was below 20%.

There are a few things to keep in mind when deciding to leave corn in the field over winter. First of all, check the stalk strength in a given a field. On a whole, the 2009 crop does not have as good of stalk quality as the 2008 corn crop did. This could create a lodging problem in a blizzard. However, this issue should be considered on a field by field basis as stalk strength will vary between hybrids and fields. Also, keep in mind that usually some bushels are lost due to field loss when corn is left in the field over winter. This might be caused by animal damage or snow damage. Generally speaking, the harsher the winter weather, the more field loss will occur. Last year, many growers felt that this field loss cost less than the handling/drying of the high moisture corn that was harvested in November/December. The last thing to consider is the current moisture content of corn. Corn over 30% is extremely difficult to handle, and leaving it in the field may be the only option at this point.

How long will it take over the winter months to get this corn to be dry enough to harvest? Last year, Joel Ransom from NDSU kept track of corn dry down over winter to see just when this would happen. Here is his article from the Crop & Pest Report written on September 17th. As you read this, remember that this article was written before we had the hard freeze in early October and before all the rain we received during the harvest season. These are both factors that have compromised our stalk strength for the corn crop that is currently in the field.

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What about letting corn dry over the winter?

As many farmers learned this past year, leaving corn over the winter in the field can be a viable option. Even with all of the snow we received, most reports indicated that corn dried down to very manageable levels and that field losses were tolerable. I think that field losses were tempered last year because we went into the winter with very good stalk strength. We had minimal stress to deplete stalk reserves prior to the killing frost. We will probably have good stalk strength again this fall since we have not seen significant stress in most fields; rains have been timely and temperatures moderate. We collected data on field dry down during the winter last year in one field in Cass County (Figure 3). As you can note, most of the serious drying occurred after the third week of February when temperatures started to warm, and were at about 16% moisture by mid-March

Conclusion

As you can note in the above paragraphs, I am reluctant to predict how the corn crop will end this year.

Obviously the crop is late and the likelihood of a frost before maturity is quite high. I think we have a reasonable chance of escaping huge yield losses, however, if we are able to move

into October without a killing frost. The crop may even dry enough for some serious harvesting in early November if October and November weather is not abnormally cold.

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