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## Scorched, scalded and burnt up

For the week of July 18, 2011



By John Schlageck, Kansas Farm Bureau

If you're a Kansas farmer you've probably jumped out of the frying pan into the fire. The fire in this case is the continuing scalding temperatures and lack of precipitation.

Here's what I'm talking about.

Ben McClure, Stevens County farms a few miles from the Oklahoma line and not far from the Colorado border. Here in far southwestern Kansas conditions are bone dry.

McClure has received one inch of moisture (including rain and snow) since he drilled his wheat crop back in mid-September. That's 10 months ago.

Ben told me he's looked at the Garden City K-State Research Station stats and the average precipitation from October through May is 8.93 inches. These records go back to 1921. That means he's nearly eight inches short.

"All I can say is it's dry," McClure says. "It's hard. It's not going to be a good year."

Temperatures have been topping the 100 degree mark and it's hurting our the young producer's crop every day. While he can't say for certain, the Stevens County farmer believes corn yields will be down 100 bushels per acre in some fields, especially in southwestern Kansas. Some may even be abandoned.

As of mid-July he's still hopeful he'll harvest 200-bushel corn. But that may be a stretch, especially if no help in the form of moisture comes from Mother Nature.

The really bad thing about his fall crops of corn, sunflowers and cotton is their yields will be down on the heels of a disastrous wheat crop. McClure's dry-land wheat was a complete bust as crop adjusters estimated it to yield one-third of a bushel per acre. He did harvest 800 acres of pretty good irrigated wheat.

Still the fall crops suffer each day without moisture – even the irrigated crops. With temperatures as hot as Hades, the fall crops require a ton of water. By 9:30 in the morning, as McClure drives through his fields looking at the crops, his corn is already starting to stress and the temps are still only about 80 degrees.

"The leaves on the corn are already starting to curl up and trying to protect any moisture the crop has," McClure notes. "A half day after the sprinkler moves past the corn it's already suffering from lack of moisture. We can't keep enough moisture on our crops. We need help from above."

The Stevens County farmer is pouring as much water to the thirsty crop he can. Standard operating procedure is for the pivot irrigation system to make a complete circle over a quarter (160 acres minus the four corners) in three and one half days. During this period, one inch of moisture is delivered to the corn crop.

That's under ideal conditions if each irrigation well can provide enough water. Some of McClure's wells don't pump enough water to put one inch of water on the crop in three and a half days.

Some of his systems take longer – up to five days. That's too long and the crop yields continue to decrease.

"When Mother Nature cooperates, you have an easier time farming," McClure says. "This heat is cooking our crops."

Just a little further north of McClure's farm – between Sublette and Garden City – the corn plants have already flashed. There's no green pigment left, he says.

"These crops are scorched, scalded and burnt up," the Stevens County farmer says. "Corn fields are uneven. Some are tasseled while others are knee high."

McClure knows 2011 is going to be a difficult year income wise. He knows all too well that even though commodity prices are high, a farmer still has to grow the bushels to sell.

So how's the 38 year old grain producer doing facing such challenges?

"Oh, I guess good," McClure says. "There's still plenty to worry about when you put your head on the pillow at night. There's still tomorrow."

Absolutely there's another day. He's got sprinklers to keep running. McClure believes he has "a great group of guys" helping him. He knows they're doing all they can to keep the thirsty crops watered.

McClure realizes he's not in this dilemma by himself. He's concerned about his neighbors who farm, businesses in his community and other farmers and towns across western Kansas that will suffer because of the ongoing drought.

"If only we could get some rain, but even with rains, it'll take several years to heal," McClure says.

In spite of the current situation, McClure wouldn't trade his farming vocation for any other. He considers himself blessed to be a farmer and have the opportunity to grow crops and livestock for others.

"It's a real privilege and honor to be able to do that," McClure says.

Make no mistake about it. He will persevere.

*John Schlageck is a leading commentator on agriculture and rural Kansas. Born and raised on a diversified farm in northwestern Kansas, his writing reflects a lifetime of experience, knowledge and passion.*

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Kansas Farm Bureau, 2627 KFB Plaza, Manhattan, Kansas 66503 - 785.587.6000