

Michigan

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Wheat woes

By JENNIFER VINCENT

THE condition of the 2009 wheat crop led farmers to drastic measures. Some left the crop in the field; others plowed it under, dumped it or even burned it off.

It was not a typical year for many wheat farmers. While some fields produced a high-quality crop, wheat grown mainly east of I-75 and north of Highway 46 suffered substantial discounts at the elevator.

Wheat was maturing on schedule, but several rain events and high humidity kept wheat wet and growers out of the fields. "Wheat sprouted when it was fully mature but never close to dry," says Bob Boehm, commodity department manager with Michigan Farm Bureau.

Aspirations for white wheat premiums were dashed with deep discounts, sometimes turning the crop into a liability rather than a moneymaker. Even feed markets were oversaturated by problematic wheat pouring in from pockets throughout the country.

Insurance gap

If that wasn't bad enough, farmers with crop insurance hoping for a reprieve were informed that USDA's Risk Management Association would not recognize the "falling-numbers" test being used at many elevators. RMA, which approves all crop insurance policies, only backs crop insurance claims for wheat losses based on visible sprout.

The falling-numbers test is not new, but it has only been used at elevators for the last few years to more accurately

Key Points

- Mature wheat never dried down enough to harvest and sprouted in the field.
- Elevators are using a falling-numbers test to determine quality.
- Crop insurance does not recognize falling-numbers discounts.

rate wheat and its suitability for millers.

But with RMA not yet recognizing falling numbers as a test to determine quality and discounts, "that really presented some discrepancies," says Boehm, noting that the two don't always correlate. "The [visible] sprout count may have been minimal, under 10% or 15%, but if the falling number was low [or undesirable], it could be discounted heavily. That creates a gap in coverage and puts the farmer in a tough situation."

To compound wheat's woes, the cool summer and wet October have made it difficult to get soybeans off, squeezing the opportunity to get wheat planted for 2010. Boehm says wheat acreage is sure to be down, and just how much Michigan white wheat will be available in 2010 for millers like Jiffy, Kellogg and Post remains a question.

On wheat's side are premiums for soft white winter wheat, its value as a rotational crop, summer cash flow and its lower input costs compared to corn or soybeans. Also, research is working on sprout-resistant varieties, and a lobbying effort is under way to have RMA recognize the falling-numbers test.

■ **Read more about wheat and the falling-numbers test on Pages 6-7.**



Turning pits into power

JEFF Smith of St. Johns is taking the cherry industry's byproduct — pits — and marketing them as a burnable fuel for wood stoves and pellet stoves. **Read more on Page 48.**