Lovas Farms

Newsletter | August 2011

Wet, Wet, and Wet

Wow! What a spring we've had. As I write this in early August, we are enjoying sunshine and 85 degrees, which is a sharp contrast to what we experienced in June. However, we need to remind ourselves that there are other parts of the state that are much worse than we are. As you may recall, excessive moisture was a problem for every single county of North Dakota this year. Bismarck, Minot, and other surrounding communities experienced record flooding. I've heard from a number of friends and neighbors with relatives who farm in the NW part of the state that many farmers planted less than 10 percent of their land. I can't imagine the hardships they're experiencing.

Our spring was certainly difficult and trying. The planter left the shop for the first field on May 13 this year, a sharp contrast with April 19 last spring. Corn, wheat, and soybean planting were frequently interrupted by rain events, which dragged on until our last soybean field was planted on June 9. I don't recall a year in which we "mudded in" as much crop as we did this year. There simply wasn't enough time to wait for the ideal seedbed conditions to develop this year, and the question often became, "Can we get the planting equipment to physically work in these conditions?" It didn't make me very proud to see mud peeling

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off the scrapers on both the planter and air seeder, then hoping the weather didn't turn hot and dry causing the ground to crust and turn rock hard making it difficult for the plants to emerge. It's an uncomfortable feeling watching the planting equipment operating in those conditions, but we made it through.

Looking back, May and June weather was awful: too cold and way too wet. However, we have been blessed with an almost perfect July. We have been fortunate in this area to miss a lot of the July storms that have been plaguing other parts of the region. It's strange to see how storms seem to develop a pattern over a year, and they seem to keep forming over the same areas again and again. There's a lot about weather forecasting that we don't yet know!

As things look now, I'm estimating we'll have corn yields ranging from a disappointing 75 bushels per acre to a well-above average 175 bushels per acre. As usual, the drain tiled fields look really sharp, as they were able to be planted earlier and didn't suffer from saturated soils. Soybean yields will vary greatly this year, as well. The drain tiled fields have tall, lush beans, and some of the fields without drain tile have very poor stands with large areas that have drowned out.

Test Plots...

This year, we were asked by both Monsanto and American Crystal Sugar to use our land for test plot research. American Crystal planted an aphanomyces test plot on our tiled ground. Crystal is interested in seeing what results drain tile has on aphanomyces root rot on sugar beets. It's really exciting to see beets grown on our land again!

Monsanto's test plot consists of some experimental corn hybrids that they're researching to determine which varieties show what traits and which have potential to go into commercial seed production.

Test plots are very slow and tedious work, and every precaution must be taken to eliminate any errors that might otherwise skew test results. We all enjoy working with researchers to help them any way possible in their goal for results. It's exciting to see these plots develop on a daily basis.

Sugar beet test plot

More Interest In Drain Tile

In July, Sarah and I were asked by a strategic marketer with John Deere for an interview about the benefits of drain tile. The gentleman from John Deere has the title of customer segment manager and is based out of Lenexa, Kansas. His job is to envision what farmers will need three to five years from now and figure out how to position John Deere to capture any business opportunities available.

His current project is a case study to determine the feasibility for John Deere to get into the drain tiling business. He is proposing that John Deere will act as a third party between landowners and tenants. His initial thoughts include positioning John Deere to finance a tiling project with a 10-year agreement between itself, the landowners, and tenants in which John Deere would use some of the profits from the increased yield that drain tiling produces to pay back the cost of the tiling project. Sarah and I both told him we thought it was a great idea, and would be an excellent agreement for all parties. The landowner would have the benefit of having drain tile on their land even after the expiration of the contract, the tenant would realize the increased production, and John Deere knows when farmers make money, it makes money. It will be an exciting project to look for in the future!

Tiling On the Lovas Farm

This year we had one field that we weren't able to get planted due to the wet conditions this spring. It really didn't work out too bad because this field was on the schedule from last fall to get drain tiled this fall. Because we didn't put a crop on this field, we were able to have Ellingson Farm Drainage tile it during June. Now we have all summer and fall to "wrestle" the tile lines back into shape – a real advantage. Because the tile is plowed in at a depth of 3'–4', the ground is rough and a high ridge is created behind the tile plow. Working these lines back down again is time-consuming. We have stage one complete, and now we can hardly tell where the tile lines were placed. As the year progresses, the soil above the tile lines will continue to sink and compact. By having the tiling done early, we will have additional opportunities to use a field cultivator and box scraper to rework and level the tile lines before freeze up.

The John Deere 8400T and box scraper help to level our tile lines.

Sarah's Summer Schedule

Sarah has had a very busy summer schedule with the continuation of her Masters education. She has been put in charge of four soybean test plots spread throughout the Red River Valley. Her research primarily deals with foliar applications to combat soybean iron chlorosis. Just as with other test plots, the work is slow and tedious, and Sarah often spends two hours just to spray a quarter-acre test plot. She's hopeful her efforts will shine through this fall come harvest time and we can see the results of her work.

Sarah's plot sprayer is MUCH smaller than the farm's new sprayer!

Spraying And More Spraying...

Our new Top Air 2,400 gallon sprayer on tracks proved to be a great investment for us this year. The large solution tank enables us to get a lot of ground covered quickly. It's relatively easy to spray 1,000 acres or more in one day with this sprayer. We've been very pleased with the flotation the tracks provide carrying this large sprayer through the field. We also see an advantage when the sprayer is pulled by a row crop track tractor because there are only two tracks every 132' to help minimize crop damage and compaction.

Currently, we are spraying for soybean aphids, which requires higher volumes of water, usually 15 gallons per acre. Operating our sprayer at those higher water rates really keeps the water truck driver busy!

Custom Farming Operations

We had a great experience this spring working with our client doing custom seeding on almost all of their crop. It will be exciting to begin harvest with them as we have some winter and spring wheat to harvest. I'm looking forward to continuing this relationship as it is a good experience to work with other operators, get a "feel" for their land, and better utilize our expensive farm equipment.

From an asset management perspective, it's frustrating to have many hundreds of thousands of dollars of harvest equipment that sits idle for ten months out of the year. By expanding our horizons and harvesting wheat and more soybeans with these machines, it helps to make better use of these assets. This is true for any business, and we as farmers need to be conscious of it.

In The Shop...

Between rounds of spraying, we're always busy with something in the shop. Our most recent project was a significant overhaul of our air seeder. Items we addressed included rolling the seeding discs, new gauge wheel tires and bearings, new original equipment manufacturer (OEM) scrapers, and adding a new scraper on the gauge wheel side of the disc developed by a manufacturing company in Montana. I'm excited to see how the new scrapers work, and we'll get a good opportunity to do so with this fall's winter wheat seeding. We have just fewer than 30,000 acres on our air seeder, and with the upgrades we made to it this summer, we should be good for many more thousand.

Air seeder is ready for winter wheat seeding

Harvest Is Coming!

Winter wheat harvest is fast approaching, and we're anxious to get the combines out and see how they perform. We have one new combine this year, a 7120 Case IH. This will be a nice match with our current 7010 combine. Harvest will be more efficient having two nearly identical combines with identical heads, as this will simplify parts inventory and maintenance. It's been seven years since I've combined wheat, so I better brush up with the owner's manual for settings and operating tips.

Summer Time With Family

We had a great weekend in July when my sister, Jeannine, her husband, Todd, and their newborn, Kate, along with Aunt Nancy, Cousin Kari, and Kari's son, Evan, came to visit. It was the first time Sarah and I got to see Kate since her baptism. It was so enjoyable to see how much she has grown. Evan, who's 5, had fun seeing and driving all sorts of farm equipment and even a railroad engine! Evan is full of curiosity, questions, and energy! It's great to see him grow and mature, and I was reminded how precious children and their perspective of life's daily events are. I hope they come back for many more visits.

Sarah, Jason, and Evan

Peter, Evan, and Jason

Game Plan For This Fall

It looks like we'll have a good labor situation for this fall, as we have three more truck drivers coming to help with harvest. This, plus our full-time help, should give us the manpower to tackle the upcoming busy harvest. Our grain system will remain unchanged from last year, but I'm sure it will be worked harder this year compared with last. Last year's corn harvest went amazingly fast and easy with mature, dry crops and warm combining conditions. I remember swatting mosquitoes as my biggest headache while operating the dryer last fall! This was a stark contrast from the drying conditions of '08 and '09 when I was bundled up in a parka trying to fend off the well-below-zero temperatures. At least this year, with our warm July, it appears we may have enough growing degree units to bring the corn to maturity and lower the harvest time grain moisture. If we have mature corn, running the dryer becomes much easier. Drying 30 percent-plus moisture corn in cold temperatures really tests your love for farming. One thing we know for sure, this fall will be different; it always is!