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Harvest prep comes to a head

BY DAN VOORHIS - The Wichita Eagle

Weather willing, cutting to begin soon

Kansas' defining annual event, the wheat harvest, likely will begin early this week in the counties along the Oklahoma state line.

It could start in Sedgwick County in a week or 10 days, and could take three weeks or so to complete, depending on the weather.

It's a massive undertaking. Scores of custom cutting crews, hundreds of grain elevators, tens of thousands of farmers and, of course, hundreds of millions of bushels of wheat.

Kansas is the wheat state and wheat has a big economic impact. Last year's crop was worth $1.8 billion, the second-highest on record.

2010's harvest promises to be less impressive. The annual wheat tour in May produced estimates of a yield of 41 bushels per acre, generating a crop of 334 million bushels — sixth best among the last 10 harvests.

But the anticipation is just the same. Every day now, farmers all over southern Kansas are walking out to their fields, plucking off some of the wheat berries and crushing them between their fingers or teeth to test the moisture content.

When their wheat turns that beautiful golden color and the heads bend over, they may cut a test load.

Modern combines have moisture sensors as do the local co-ops. Elevators typically will only take wheat of 14 percent moisture and below.

Farmers are also checking the weather. A dry, sunny harvest can last 10 days, while a wet, muddy harvest can last 40.

So, when the wheat turns, the moisture is right, the skies clear and the morning dew evaporates, anxious farmers will hit the field.

The farmer

Dennis Metz farms with his sons on 1,500 acres of wheat spread over about 16 miles in Sumner County.

He has spent the last few months replacing bearings, changing belts and flushing radiators on the combines.

This is Metz's 57th harvest, and he's got his system down. He keeps a little black book and at the end of fall, when he's done with his corn and soybeans, he'll note the dings and complaints in his equipment. That's what he'll work on over the winter and spring.

He can feel that harvest is very close, he said. He may make a test cut early next week. If the moisture numbers pan out, he'll start cutting.

By that time, another son, plus a load of grandchildren, will be there to help.

"Everybody pitches in, if not in the field, then there are meals and parts to get," he said.

Those driving the three combines and the trucks will go up to 12 hours a day for 10 to 12 days straight — if they're lucky.

"The things that make harvest so intense is that a whole year's salary is got in 10 days," Metz said.

"If some sort of bobble or hailstorm comes up, that could wipe out a year's worth of money and time. It takes a special kind of nut to do this."

The custom cutter

Ed Johnson, co-owner of J&M Harvesting, a custom cutting operation based in Sedgwick, is on his first stop for the year in the area around Okarche, Okla., about 50 miles northwest of Oklahoma City.

He sent his three combines and other vehicles down about two weeks ago, and he headed down last week just before harvest.

They made a test cut Thursday that tested out about 13 percent moisture. He got approval from the elevator to bring in the first load, but it came in at 15. Oh, well. So they shut it down for the day to wait for the June heat to do its work.

They made another test cut Friday and started cutting in earnest Friday afternoon.

But life is full of surprises, often unpleasant. One of the combines had just made its first round and stopped — broken fuel pump. The combine wasn't that old and the pump should have lasted years. It was just a fluke.

He called the local John Deere dealer.

"They said the good news is they had one," Johnson said, with a laugh. "The bad news is it cost $5,000. I haven't even started yet, and I'm already $5,000 in the hole."

He expects to cut at farms in Sedgwick County within two weeks, then proceed to western Nebraska and finish up in the Black Hills by early August.

He has to be back by mid-August to start work as the auto mechanics teacher at Goddard High School.

The co-op manager

Larry Werner, branch manager at the Garden Plain Coop, has run a harvest before. This is his 37th year at the co-op in Garden Plain and 43rd overall.

The co-op has two elevators, which each serve 17 or 18 120-foot-tall silos. He expects farmers to bring in 800,000 to 1 million bushels of grain to the co-op during harvest.

His job, he said, is to oversee the logistics of testing and loading the grain, shifting it among the available silos and trying to keep as much of it in company-owned space as possible to maximize the storage fees the co-op collects.

The co-op will see 300 to 350 trucks a day bringing in grain during harvest, he said. And, at the same time, he'll ship some of that grain out to a terminal in Wichita partly owned by the co-op's owner, Farmers Cooperative Elevator Co.

Farmers get anxious to start cutting, he said, so sometimes the co-op sees wheat that's too high in moisture early on, but that sorts itself out as the harvest continues.

But, he said, if the weather gets soggy, that's when life turns miserable.

"The wheat deteriorates in quality and it makes it tougher to cut and (the combines) get stuck in the mud," he said. "The wheat lingers and lingers and lingers.

"A good swift harvest is best, especially if everybody gets done by the 4th. If it dips until the middle of July, it's rather gruesome."

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