

## **Decisions, decisions: Cold April means rethinking May priorities**

By Meryl Rygg McKenna

A recent cartoon showed a guy using a hairdryer on a frozen lake below a boat ramp, while his buddy yelled “Hurry up!” from the trailered boat.

This region’s agricultural sector has reason to be as impatient as the wannabe fisherman. Much of northern Montana received moisture during late April, but even then the label read, “Do not open until May.”

In spite of the chill, the winter wheat status is good news, according to an April 29 report from the National Agricultural Statistics Service office in Great Falls. Winter wheat condition across Montana was rated 57 percent good to excellent, the same as the five-year average. Winter wheat green and growing as of April 29 was 73 percent – below last year’s 90 percent but above the 68-percent five-year average.

Spring wheat is a different story. Twelve percent was planted as of April 28, compared to the five-year average of 39 percent. Barley, dry peas, flaxseed, lentils, oats and durum wheat are all significantly late in planting, the NASS reported.

Markus Braaten, a Certified Crop Adviser, said in a recent interview, “Across the board and extending into the Midwest, we’re way behind. Normally, guys are done (planting) by now – this year they’re just getting started, and each day’s delay potentially limits the end result.”

Considering Montana’s short growing season, how can anyone catch up?

- **Planting Depth:** This season, Braaten said, consider placing your seed a little shallower than normal. With cooler temperatures deeper in the soil, seeds can take advantage of the warming trend near the surface, possibly sprouting sooner.

- **Seeding Rate:** Braaten suggested bumping up seeding rates for cereal crops to decrease tillering. The main stem, first to mature, generally gives most of the yield. Each additional tiller stem is a few days behind. While tillers have the potential to develop grain-bearing heads, Braaten said to concentrate on main stems that are likely to mature earlier. Growers should be using a thousand kernel weight or seeds per pound, percent germination and an estimated mortality to calculate their seeding rate based on an optimum plant density.

- **Fertility:** Seeds need nutrients such as phosphorus, potassium and zinc in their early stages of growth. If these nutrients are too deep in the soil, they will be less available to the plants.

“Place these key nutrients where the seed has greater access to them. That means with or very near the seed at the point of planting,” Braaten advised.

For example, plants need phosphorus in every stage of growth, so it must be readily available for the roots to find. Fertility strategies that build roots early can have an impact throughout the growing season.

Bigger root systems are better able to explore the soil and access more water and nutrients; this is why developing root-dominant plants is important, Braaten said. If the soil has too much nitrogen, plants may have tremendous top growth, but not much of a root system. Testing the soil helps a grower track the soil’s nutrient levels.

### **Solar power**

Above ground, each seedling becomes a solar power plant; the green, above-ground biomass functions as the solar panel.

“We want to stack as many solar panels as possible in each square foot or acre to intercept as much sunlight as possible, as quickly as possible,” Braaten said. “Our goal is to convert solar energy to stored energy that we can haul to the elevator.”

While general suggestions for this season might sound simple, truly maximizing a specific field’s potential is more complex.

Recommendations need to be very grower-centric, Braaten pointed out, because every region, every grower, every field and every season is unique. A crop adviser will help you focus on the

facts, but decisions are ultimately yours; it's your farm. When you figure the economics, input prices, seed, crop protection, and so on, these decisions can represent thousands to tens of thousands of dollars each.

For example, although Braaten suggested increasing your seeding rates this year, changing those rates on even a single field can make a big difference in the input budget. However, it may pay off in the long run.

"The nice thing about my work is that I can build a relationship with a grower and help carry some of the stress of making decisions – take out some of the emotion," Braaten added.

### **Timing is key**

This year's late start may shorten the growing season; it also could change a crop's vulnerability to pests or plant diseases.

Braaten said, "In northwest Montana, I prefer to have all spring wheat seeded by May 1. When spring wheat is planted later, it is more susceptible to damage from the orange wheat blossom midge because wheat is more likely to be in a vulnerable growth stage when the midge are flying."

In a season like this, the stress of hurrying is added to the stress of management decisions that could affect the harvest in a large way.

"The later we get, the more potential we have for loss," Braaten said. "You might want to check with your insurance program – a lot of them have planting deadlines, past which your crop is not covered."

### **Make the most of it**

"Once we can start seeding, keep seeding until it's done. Cover as many acres in as short a time as possible. I would get my spring wheat and canola in first, then switch to barley," Braaten said. "Have everything ready. We need to have our fertilizer all set, right by the drill.

"A lot of growers are inclined to cut costs in times such as these. But don't compromise production. Consider reallocating resources from one field to another, where the crop has the best opportunity to utilize the nutrients. Any ground that's marginal might be best left to fallow, even if that wasn't your original plan," he added.

For more information on certified crop advisers, go to <http://www.certifiedcropadviser.org>.