

U.S. Grain Farmers Provide Crop Updates

The February issue of *Grain News* included updates on this year's outlook for the U.S. grain planting, growing and harvest seasons with three producers: Greg Alber, corn farmer from Iowa; Adam Baldwin, sorghum farmer from Kansas; and Mark Seastrand, barley farmer from North Dakota. This issue checks in with these farmers to learn how their crops are progressing.

U.S. Corn Production Promising This Year

Corn planting dates varied this spring depending on soil moisture and temperature, both of which are critical for proper germination. Information from Iowa State University's extension and outreach office indicates corn planting in Iowa during a typical year can take place any time from early April to mid-May, depending on the location.

For Iowa farmer Greg Alber, planting conditions in April were suitable and allowed him to get his crop in the ground on time. By mid-June the corn in his fields had reached the vegetative growth stage with plants having six fully expanded corn leaves, often referred to as V6 stage.

"The corn is really looking good," he said. "We were able to get into the field on time, and weather conditions were favorable for the early part of the growing season."

In fact, much of the U.S. Corn Belt is also seeing the makings of a successful corn crop. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) national crop progress report for mid-June, which includes 18 of the top corn-producing states, shows the crop is rated at 59 percent good and 14 percent excellent. These figures are consistent with estimates from the previous year at the same time.



Corn at the V6 vegetative stage on Greg Alber's farm in Iowa.


Much of the corn-growing region received above normal rainfall in early June, and that was followed by warm drying days making the wet conditions manageable for most U.S. corn farmers. Natural drainage and slope of the fields were also effective to manage the amount of rainfall.


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“Additional rainfall events have produced some excessively wet conditions and standing water in some parts, especially in areas on the river side of levees,” said Paul Bertels, vice president of production and sustainability at National Corn Growers Association.

“The majority of corn in the Midwest was deep enough into the soil and had taken in enough nitrogen to avoid detrimental stress when a tropical depression passed through the U.S. Corn Belt in mid-June,” Bertels said. “But since that time we’ve had additional heavy rainfall causing damage to some of the crop, and we’re seeing that reflected in USDA estimates.”

The end of June report has estimates of 88.897 million acres (35.9 million hectares) planted, approximately 300,000 acres (121,000 hectares) less than the March estimate of 89.199 million acres (36 million hectares) and 2 percent lower than last year’s total of 90.597 million acres (37 million hectares).

Throughout the remainder of the growing season, Alber will monitor his fields closely using an aerial drone, which allows him to analyze imagery from the fields and determine any areas that require attention. He uses other technology services, including smartphone applications, to monitor soil moisture and temperature, nitrogen levels and overall field health. The information gathered is delivered via text message and compliments the data collected by the drone.

Alber is pleased with the start of this year’s corn crop and is hopeful that weather conditions will remain favorable throughout the growing season. “This year’s crop is shaping up to be better than 2014,” he said.

Kansas Grain Sorghum Farmer Expects Good Growing Season

Adam Baldwin, who farms in central Kansas, said although he hasn’t planted his grain sorghum yet, he’s looking forward to a successful growing season thanks to much needed moisture that he received late in the spring.

“We’re set up to have a really good crop this year,” he said. “Although we’re getting in the field later than we planned, planting later is typically better for the crop.”



Planting sorghum on Adam Baldwin’s farm in central Kansas.
Photo courtesy Alive & Well in Kansas.

While cool, wet weather in Baldwin’s part of the state kept him from getting into the field as early as he’d planned, there’s still plenty of time to get the crop in the ground, Baldwin said. According to Kansas State University, a successful crop can be planted from early May through late June, depending upon location within the state and local conditions.

Coarse Grain Crop Progress

U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) reports indicate 92 percent of the corn crop was planted by the end of May, which is slightly higher than the 5-year average. The end of June reports show the corn crop just entering the silking stage with 68 percent in excellent or good condition.

Corn acreage is estimated at 88.897 million acres planted (35.9 million hectares), which translates to an estimated total corn supply of 14.8 billion bushels (376 million metric tons). This is about 2 percent lower from the previous year.

The sorghum crop is 92 percent planted through the end of June with 68 percent reported as excellent or good condition. USDA estimates an increase of 11 percent from the previous year in total acres planted.

Barley is reported as 73 percent in excellent or good condition, which is 5 percent higher than the previous year. This is largely contributed to favorable weather conditions in the growing region.

Additionally, topsoil moisture across the United States is reported as 61 percent adequate, a level that crop development would be normal and unhindered.

USDA Crop Progress reports are available at www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/National_Crop_Progress.

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“As long as we have the crop planted by July 4, we’ll have plenty of growing season left,” Baldwin said.

Late June U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) reports show 90 percent of sorghum in Kansas is planted. This is down just 4 percent from the average for 2010-2014, and the difference is due, in part, to heavy rainfall in some areas of the state. Much of the U.S. Sorghum Belt experienced heavy rains late in the spring, pushing back planting dates on many farms.

In addition to weather conditions, weeds and grass are other threats to the health of the crop during the growing season. Baldwin takes steps to minimize these issues by not planting the same crop on the same piece of land every year to keep fields clean. Following emergence of the grain, crop consultants scout Baldwin’s fields. They utilize chlorophyll meters to measure the green pigment in plants used for photosynthesis and nitrogen rich strips to determine nitrogen needs within a particular field.

Baldwin is looking forward to a strong market at harvest this fall. Sorghum production in the United States is seeing significant growth due to increased demand from the international market. USDA estimates this year’s planted acres will reach 7.9 million acres (3.2 million hectares), an increase of 11 percent from the previous season.

Positive Outlook For U.S. Barley Production In 2015

North Dakota barley farmer Mark Seastrand said his barley fields are off to a great start. “Conditions were ideal at planting time in mid-May, and timely rain has helped to kick off the growing season,” he said. “We’re cautiously optimistic about this year’s crop.”

Seastrand has a new addition to his farm this year – a newly released variety of barley, *Genesis*, developed by North Dakota State University. This variety will be harvested for seed. While it is cared for the same as other varieties he is growing, there are differences at planting and through the growth stages.

“For seed production, *Genesis* is thinly planted,” Seastrand said. “Throughout the growth stage, plants are identical to other types of barley, but the heads will be different at harvest because the kernel is larger.”

Researchers are hopeful its low grain protein may be beneficial when growing malting barley in environments where moisture stress develops after heading.

Seastrand said barley production in his state looks good – especially in the western and central regions where plants are reaching the fourth- and fifth-leaf stage. However, weather has hampered the growing season in areas of eastern and northern North Dakota where late frost and excessive rainfall could potentially affect yield in some fields.

“Overall, the barley crop is ahead of schedule this year,” said Steve Edwardson, executive administrator for the North Dakota Barley Council. “Barley jointed is at 95 percent for the end of June, which has surpassed the 67 percent average for this time of the year. At this stage of development, the nodes on the main stem of the barley plant are first detected and the developing head is just above the joint, or node. This is an early indicator of reproductive stage.”

U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) announced in its end of June crop progress report that barley conditions in North Dakota rated 73 percent good and 13 percent excellent.



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The national report, showing combined results from the top barley producing states of Idaho, Minnesota, Montana, North Dakota and South Dakota, also indicates a positive start to barley production this year. Most of the crop is listed in good or excellent condition for this region, which is better than estimates at this time in the previous year, according to USDA reports.

In these early stages of growth, farmers apply herbicides and fungicides as needed to their crops. These applications prevent the spread of disease and weeds within the crop and positively impact quality and yield at harvest.

Precision agriculture tools are employed during this stage of the growing season as well. Auto steer on Seastrand's tractor and a rate controller on his sprayer, along with a drift control agent for windy days, ensures proper application of fungicides and herbicides. These tools plus the manual inspections Seastrand makes of his fields allow him to monitor the condition of his crop and address any needs.

Timely rainfall is key to a successful crop this year, and it looks like the crop is on the right track in the top barley producing states.

"Although things can change quickly, the crop looks exceptional at this point, and there's more moisture predicted in the future," Seastrand said.

USDA crop progress reports are available at <http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/MannUsda/viewDocumentInfo.do?documentID=1048>.

For crop progress reports by state, visit www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/State_Crop_Progress_and_Condition/.

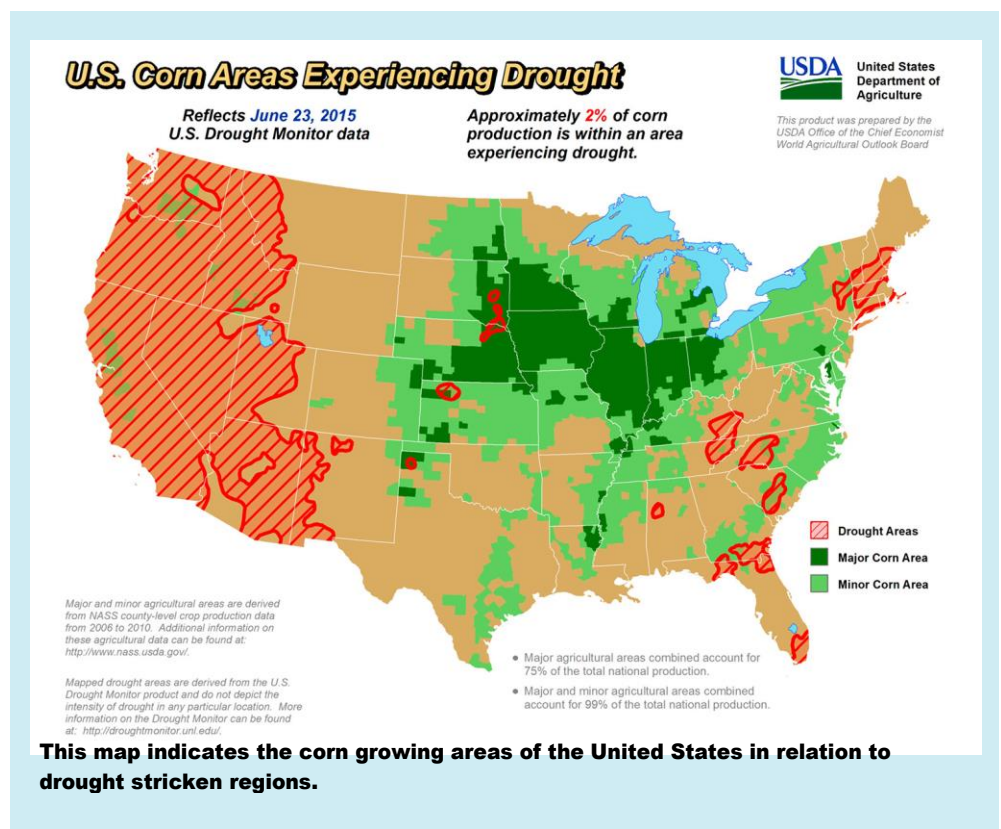
Charts and maps are available at www.nass.usda.gov/Charts_and_Maps/Crop_Progress_&_Condition/2015/.

Weather Patterns Point To Above Average Crop For 2015

Overall, U.S. farmers have had a positive start to the corn, sorghum and barley growing seasons. Weather patterns show favorable conditions throughout the summer and continuing into harvest for most of the country.

El Niño is partially responsible. El Niño is a large-scale, ocean-atmosphere climate interaction. According to the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the phenomenon begins with a periodic warming of sea surface temperatures across the central and east-central Equatorial Pacific and then affects weather across the United States.

A typical El Niño summer includes hot, dry conditions for the western regions of the United States but higher rainfall and cooler temperatures in the Great Plains



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and much of the Midwest. El Niño is not the only factor affecting current weather patterns, but is a major contributor.

“Market traders have the attitude that El Niño decreases the possibility of the most harmful weather to a crop, specifically higher temperatures and drought. We can look forward to a good crop year, and anticipate a price depressing force, as market trends have shown since late 2013,” said Christopher Hurt, Ph.D., a professor at Purdue University.

Much of the Midwestern Corn Belt has already seen above average rainfall, as have other parts of the country, with the exception of the West Coast.

According to the USDA’s Drought Monitor report reflecting data through June 23, only 2 percent of corn production is in areas experiencing drought.

In early June, USDA crop ratings showed the 2015 crop in the 80th percentile for yields between the years 2000 and 2015; however those estimates are expected to change if growing regions receive excessive rainfall. The coming weeks will heavily influence the final crop ratings. “The next six to seven weeks will be critical for corn farmers,” Hurt said. “Weather is the most important factor for the reproduction and grain fill stages of the growing season.”

The Southern Plains region, specifically Texas, Oklahoma and Kansas, have experienced above average rainfall, which delayed sorghum planting. In Kansas, the leading sorghum-producing state, planting was nearly two weeks behind schedule going into the month of June; however, 90 percent of the crop was planted by the end of the month.

Hurt also said to expect more sorghum planted in 2015 than previous years. Premiums have increased for sorghum growers. Additionally, China has increased its demand for sorghum during the past year and other buyers are also interested in the grain.

While the El Niño pattern looks good for a majority of the United States, the western region of the country is experiencing an extreme drought. Farmers planted barley ahead of schedule in the Northwest, where most of the crop is grown.

“Overall, the 2015 crop year is off to a good start, and the odds favor above trend yields. But there is always a reservation so early in the season,” Hurt said. ■

Keep Track Of U.S. Corn Crop Production Online

Be sure to check out updates being posted by U.S. corn farmers on the Facebook page, *Growing the 2015 U.S. Corn Crop*.

The page features crop progress and condition information, weather updates from farmers and photos from U.S. corn farms.

The page can be found at www.facebook.com/GrowCorn. ■

