

Memorial Day Weekend Rains!

By Mark Watson

Panhandle No-Till Educator

Memorial weekend and the past two weeks have proved to be a real blessing for those of us in agriculture in western Nebraska. We received some much needed moisture which will go a long way in providing subsoil moisture for this year's crops and pastures. The unfortunate side of this storm was the unending wind that came with it. Wind gusts to 60 mph were common throughout the Panhandle.

On our farm we received 1.7 inches of rain which brings our total for the month of May to 2.3 inches. We are still .6 of an inch below normal for the month, but in much better shape than we were last year at the end of May. In the spring of 2007 I had a total of 6.45 inches of precipitation at this time of year in my fallow period behind winter wheat. This year at the end of May when my summer crops of field peas, chickpeas, dry land corn, and proso millet are being planted, or are just beginning to use moisture, I have had a total of 8.18 inches of moisture since my fallow behind last year's winter wheat crop began. Behind last year's proso millet and dry land corn crops my fallow period has received 5.43 inches of moisture.

As I have stated in previous articles, my soils are only capable of storing between 4- 6.5 inches of moisture in a 4 foot soil profile. In both of these fallow periods, whether behind the winter wheat crop with 8.18 inches of moisture, or behind the corn and millet crops, with 5.43 inches of moisture, I have reasonably full soil moisture profiles to start this year's growing season with. I realize there is some evaporation that occurs, but the majority of the moisture I have received is stored in the soil profile. If we receive normal rainfall during the months of June and July, I feel we have a good chance at producing profitable dry land crops even though we have been below normal in precipitation over the past year. Storing moisture in the soil profile during these shorter fallow periods as compared to the traditional wheat/fallow cropping system is more efficient at managing moisture we do receive. Continuing a fallow period once the soil profile is full doesn't maximize the use of moisture we do receive. I've always felt if I can get our normal 15 inches of precipitation, I can raise profitable dry land crops in a continuous no till cropping system.

Unfortunately, before the welcome rain came the wind. Very serious soil erosion occurred in our area for several days as the south east winds blew consistently 20-30 mph, with gusts as high as 60mph. The loss of soil is 1 ton per acre if you lose a layer of soil the thickness of a dime. There were several fields around the area that lost much more than a ton per acre. The cause of this soil erosion is not the wind but extensive tillage which destroys soil aggregates and the lack of residue on the soil's surface to protect the soil. We have relatively shallow soils in the Panhandle and cannot afford to lose soil to unnecessary erosion. Adopting no till farming practices will eliminate damaging tillage practices and leave the previous crop's residue on the soil surface as a layer of protection against the winds which will always blow in this area.

I would encourage everyone to take advantage of some no till farming educational opportunities that are coming in the near future. No Till on the Plains will be hosting a 3 day bus tour to South Dakota on June 17-19, 2008. This will be an excellent opportunity to tour large scale no till farming operations with similar growing conditions to our area. We will also visit Dakota Lakes Research Farm. Dwayne Beck has been doing no till research on this farm for about 19 years and has a wealth of knowledge on all aspects of no till farming. Cost of the tour is \$69.95/person which includes travel and lodging. To sign up for the tour contact No Till On The Plains at <http://www.notill.org/> or 1-888-330-5142.

The Upper Niobrara White Natural Resource District will also be hosting field days on June 24th at the Watson Brother's Farm north of Alliance and June 25th at Curt Roth's Farm near Clinton. Both of these farms have been in long term no till crop production. This will be a good opportunity to visit with local no till producers about their experience with no till production practices.

The South Platte Natural Resource District will be hosting a no till field day on June 23rd in Sidney. The field day will include the Nienhueser and Beyer farms. These farms have been in long term no till production and will offer an excellent opportunity to learn more about no till farming in our area.

Please contact me about any of these no till educational opportunities. My phone number is 308-760-5259 or my e-mail address is garbanzobeanfarmer_mark@hotmail.com.