

Spring is here: Be calm, plan and calibrate

By Meryl Rygg McKenna

Spring arrived in much of Montana about three to four weeks earlier than last year. Farmers in some areas are planting spring crops, while in other areas early April snow and freezing temperatures put the brakes on seeding.

Corny Dane, Certified Crop Adviser at Mountain View Co-op in North Central Montana, said the spring cycles stress plants, with temperatures below freezing at night and into the 50s or 60s during the day.

Every National Weather Service reporting station in Montana showed average temperatures above normal in March, with no monthly averages below normal. Eleven stations statewide reported 10 to 11 degrees F above normal, according to NWS data. Similar conditions are evident in North Dakota, according to its March 30 Crop Progress and Condition report.

Low moisture further stresses plants. Dane reported instances of winter wheat losing progress it had gained with the warm temperatures, because of the lack of moisture. The U.S. Drought Monitor's Palmer Drought Index offer overviews and discussion on moisture conditions nationwide; it shows that much of the nation is experiencing increasingly dry conditions.

Most years, producers call for fertilizer on hay ground and winter wheat first, before the spring crop craze. This year, however, conditions are such that topdressing winter wheat is happening at the same time as fertilizing spring crops in some areas.

This increases the challenge for drivers; everyone wants the job done at once. There seems to be a perennial deficit of workers and equipment for spring fertilizer needs, and that problem increases in a year like this.

In the midst of growers' spring fever, here are some reminders from Agronomy Division Manager Gareth Redgrave, also at Mountain View Co-op, and a member of the Rocky Mountain CCA Board.

Take time to scout

While focusing on getting in the spring crop, remember to scout winter wheat fields. There have been reports of powdery mildew and over-wintering rust disease in several Montana counties (see Montana State University's Ag Alerts for more information), and winter annuals such as cheatgrass are growing like crazy, according to Redgrave. Controlling cheatgrass in the spring is always unpredictable and most herbicide labels are restricted to specific crop growth stages. Paying heed to weeds present, growth stage of weeds and crop and effectiveness of different herbicides pays off in the long run.

Scout fields prior to pre-plant spraying to look for emerged broadleaf weeds that may require an additional additive or herbicide to be tank-mixed with the glyphosate. There have been several reports of button-sized kochia already emerged and at this growth stage

they are hard to control with glyphosate alone. There are several tank-mix options that can aid in the control of button-sized kochia.

Calibrate, calibrate, calibrate

Make sure you are calibrating the drill when you are using granular inoculants for legumes. There are frequently shortages of inoculants, and this year is no exception to the rule. If you don't calibrate correctly you will be either under- or over-applying. If you under-apply there will be poor nodulation and if you over-apply, not only will you increase costs, but there may not be any inoculant available to complete the planting.

Fertilizer Nitrogen source

With this weather, volatility of urea becomes a bigger concern. Growers may want to consider using fertilizer treatments that contain the urease inhibitor N-(n-butyl) thiophosphoric triamide (NBPT) to control volatilization for up to 14 days. There are other products that are marketed to control volatilization, but to this date only NBPT has been proven effective by MSU research and is also included as an option in the CSP program.

NBPT products can also be added to UAN (urea ammonium nitrate or 32 solution) at half the rate needed for urea and will provide the same level of protection against volatility. Growers will need to work out the economics of this option compared to treating and topdressing urea. If growers want to use UAN instead of urea, they need to plan ahead because there is limited infrastructure, storage and delivery equipment for UAN in Montana.

Be calm and be safe

It is more important to do things right the first time than to do them fast.

“Calm down, plan ahead, communicate with your supplier and we will get through this spring just like we have done numerous times,” Redgrave said. “When planning, follow the 4 R's: Right source, Right rate, Right time and Right place.”

Always read and follow label directions, even if you read them last year. Recommendations and directions can change. Wear protective gloves, suits, masks and other gear as recommended on the label.

Some factors are within human control, while many others are not. The best a grower can do is to scout, pay attention, control what can be controlled, and be ready to roll with the punches. The rest is up to Mother Nature.

There is a saying that goes something like “The hands that feed the world are often missing fingers.” Make safety, not speed, the top priority.

For more information on certified crop advisers, or to find one near you, go to <http://www.certifiedcropadviser.org>.

Montana State University's Ag Alerts are available at mtagalert.org. NOAA drought reports are available at <https://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/sotc/drought/#det-over>.