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PRODUCER PROFILE #2



The Producers...

Langbank, SK area brothers **TOM** and **ROBIN HEWSON**

have been farming together since about 1960. They work an Oxbow clay loam in the black soil zone. Their land contains pockets of bush and several sloughs. Tom is married to Mary. Robin is married to Dorothy and has three children.

Farming at a higher elevation makes their land susceptible to early frost in August. While moisture is quite variable, during the past ten years it has been quite wet, with decent snow cover during the winter.

The Hewsons plant 800-1000 acres of winter wheat on their 3500-5500 acre operation (including rented land), planting into either canola or barley stubble. They have tried fall rye. Other crops in their rotation include: spring wheat, and flax or durum, and oats.



What Made Them Try Winter Wheat?

The Hewson brothers first started growing winter wheat in the fall of 1984, primarily as a way to spread out the annual workload. "It was also a way for us to move into zero-till with the equipment we had," says Tom. "In the early days, the equipment was limited, but our International 7200 hoe drill did well to get through the trash and stubble."

"We also noticed that other people were having some success with winter wheat," says Robin.

The 1984 crop was fairly good, but they experienced problems in 1985 with winterkill. There were also serious local rust problems with the original Northstar variety in 1985 and 1986. The Hewsons note that many early adopters (10-20% locally) never came back to winter wheat after this. Tom and Robin feel they were lucky to get their crops in early during this period, and proper fertilization was key.

Growing Winter Wheat: The Hewson Advantage

Distributing the workload on their large farm is a major advantage for the Hewsons. "Winter wheat is also one of the better paying crops these days, when you take all the costs of production into account," say Tom and Robin.

Winter wheat also seems to fit the local growing conditions, especially during the past few years. "During the wet years, with most moisture coming in May and June, winter wheat has had more chance for success than the spring crops," says Tom.

Another advantage for the Hewsons relates to labour and equipment costs. Seeding of winter wheat can occur during the fall, while the harvest of spring crops continues, with no additional requirement for help or equipment.

The Hewsons also credit winter wheat for providing a good introduction to zero-till. "Our land was quite eroded," says Robin. The Hewsons had to start saving their soil, and winter wheat was part of the answer.



Winter Wheat Advantages

- ☛ *spread out the workload; cost-effectiveness*
- ☛ *great crop for the wet cycle*
- ☛ *good introduction to zero-tillage*

Keys to Successful Production: The Hewson Experience

The Hewsons have found that control of annual weeds is one of the most important factors in producing a good crop. “We prefer a pre-seed burnoff with Roundup,” says Robin. “We usually seed fairly shallow with phosphate fertilizer, adding some nitrogen later.” Tom notes the Hewsons worked closely with local agronomists to develop their seed/fertilization package. “The Winter Cereals Canada production manual and Ducks Unlimited were also quite helpful,” he says.

In order to address their nitrogen fertilizer challenges, the Hewsons now have a zero till drill with side banding fertilization. With the help of their agronomist, they have now gone to potash fertilization during seeding. **Average Yields:** Tom and Robin’s winter wheat yields are in the range of 55-75 bushels per acre.



Growing Challenges

Even on their larger operation, with the availability of extra help and equipment, the Hewsons experience the “psychological challenge” of seeding winter wheat during the fall harvest period. This feeling is common for many winter wheat producers. The harvest of spring crops is the top priority, but it can get frustrating as you move later into the fall, given that you know the winter wheat is waiting to go in.

Like other producers, the Hewsons typically will take advantage of a rain-induced break in the harvest to get the winter wheat in. Their preference is to plant into canola, because it is easier to seed into.

They have experienced some difficulty in distributing nitrogen fertilizer effectively. “The spin spreaders don’t work that well, as the spread pattern can be quite susceptible to side winds, resulting in streaking problems. Lodging problems can also occur with delayed maturity in areas of excess nitrogen,” notes Tom.

Another challenge with nitrogen relates to coverage. “We’re always looking for an excuse to cut back - when it’s too wet, too dry, or for some other reason,” says Tom. “Every time we back off, we’ve regretted it,” he says. “There’s a need for sound advice on fertilization.”



Advice Offered to Other Growers

The Hewsons are big believers in using the right equipment.

This means having a seed drill which can easily get through standing stubble while maintaining good shallow depth control.

They also recommend getting lots of advice. “Talk to other producers, and talk to the agronomists. Don’t take it all as gospel, but most of it is true. You need to seek out the advice,” says Tom.