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PRODUCER PROFILE #3



Why They Grow Winter Wheat

The Cowiesons started planting winter wheat because it works well in their zero-till operation, and the Cowiesons are enthusiastic zero-tillers, despite the recent moisture challenges. "Even though we've had our struggles... in '99, we had about 75% of our crop in, and in '99, most guys around here were lucky if they got 50% seeded. I think it's purely because we haven't broken up the surface or the top 2 or 3 inches of soil and turned it into a bunch of muck. As long as we could run over top of it we could seed it," Trevor says.

Winter wheat also improves cash flow on the Cowieson farm. They market their grain both through the Canadian Wheat Board and straight off the farm as feed, depending on what the basis levels are. "We've sold to hog operations, cattle, all kinds of stuff..," says Trevor, who likes the crop's high yields, decreased problems with fusarium, and the fact that it spreads out farm workload, especially in the spring.

When southwest Manitoba was hit with flooding and excessive spring moisture levels, the Cowiesons had a problem with fusarium in the winter wheat. But, Trevor says, "typically, you beat that. Our hard wheats have been pretty decent, even though fusarium's around. But our winter wheat usually turns out to be way better off."

The Producers...

TREVOR COWIESON and his brother **REID** farm grains, oilseeds, pulses, and other specialty crops southwest of Souris, MB. Their soil is sandy clay loam. Until the last couple of years, the biggest challenge to their cropping operation was a shortage of moisture. Since 1999, it has been a challenge dealing with excess moisture levels.

The Cowiesons have run a total zero-till operation for the last 12 years. They planted their first crop of winter wheat six years ago. A typical year sees about 320 acres planted to the crop, although they have had up to 600 acres of winter wheat.

A typical crop rotation is spring wheat, canola, winter wheat, flax. "It's wheat, oilseed, or wheat, something... we haven't had back to back wheat for 15 years," says Trevor. Along with winter wheat, typical crops include hard wheats, durum, canola, peas, lentils, flax, canary seed, and sunflowers.





Keys to Success and Production Challenges

The Cowiesons differ from many fellow winter wheat producers in that they often seed into flax or pea stubble, rather than the more typical canola.

“What we’ve found is if there’s enough moisture to germinate, we don’t mind growing winter wheat on flax, because it gets an early jump. If there are volunteers, it usually chokes them out, and you have the moisture to get going in the springtime,” says Trevor.

Peas are also an attractive first crop, say the Cowiesons. “Our biggest challenge is seeding dates. That’s why we seed a lot of peas; they are typically off early and sometimes we may not have our flax or canola off in time to meet the crop insurance deadline.”

Trevor laughs when asked when he usually seeds. Ideally, it’s around September 15, a little later than many Manitoba producers. “We have seeded as late as September 25, but you have to watch it then - you may not get too much growth before winter. But one year we had only 2 leaves when it started to get cold and snow, and the crop turned out fine.”

Trevor emphasizes the importance of seeding shallow. “We are typically in the 3/4 inch depth range or shallower- we don’t like to get deeper than that.”

Come harvest, the Cowiesons straight combine the crop. They’ve never had to swath it.



The Cowieson Treatment Plan

They usually spray the winter wheat with Tilt. “The newer varieties are better with regard to rust and other diseases.” The Cowiesons have grown Kestrel, and plan to get some higher yielding Falcon, which has more rust resistance.

Average yields: since they began growing winter wheat, their lowest yield has been 40 bushels per acre, with their highest around 75 bushels.



Winter Wheat Production Notes

- ☛ explore stubble options - see what works best
- ☛ seed as early as possible - seed shallow
- ☛ experiment with seed variety and spray combinations
- ☛ test all soil for ideal fertilization rates each year
- ☛ swathing not usually necessary - straight combine if you can

They spray with Estaprop broadleaf. “Very rarely do we have to spray for wild oats, because winter wheat has such a head start on the weed; its thick canopy chokes it out.”

The Cowiesons typically soil test every field annually, and fertilize according to the results. “Because of winter wheat’s yield potential, we will target a fair amount of nitrogen on those fields. If we put winter wheat on pea stubble, we tend to cut it back a bit.” They use about 20 lbs of actual phosphate with the seed. *WWC note: seeding winter wheat into pea stubble may expose your crop to increased incidence of winter injury/kill.*

“The theory has been that you shouldn’t have too much top growth on your crop going into winter, or you run the risk of more winter kill,” said Cowieson. Some of the research out there says you can put nitrogen down with it, and I think we’ll try some of that this year. However, what we usually do is top dress with spoke-injected liquid or something in the springtime,” says Trevor.