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PRODUCER PROFILE #4



Why They Grow Winter Wheat

As the Archibalds expanded their farm, winter wheat was a good fit. They thought they could farm more acres with the same machinery given the workload-spreading feature of winter wheat.

A second reason was to manage the risk from excess moisture and the disease that comes with it, because “even though we’re in a pattern of fairly high rainfall, it’s still easy to seed in the fall - because it’s drier. In the spring, you already have a crop growing and you don’t have to go out there and pile through the mud, and it’s using all that moisture very well,” says Archibald.

One of the greatest advantages of a winter cereal is the decreased need for herbicides, because the crops are so competitive and start in the spring, a wild oat or millet spray is just not required unless it’s a very abnormal situation, notes Archibald. “Your costs per acre can be quite a bit less. It also offers consumers an increased level of confidence, showing them agriculture is doing what it can to lesson its dependence on chemicals.”

In the long term, Archibald sees soil conservation as a paramount advantage to seeding winter cereals using zero-till. “It is the ultimate control over soil loss: not only do you have crop residue remaining to trap snow and hold water to control runoff, but you’ve got plants seeded into the ground, and their root systems are in the soil, holding it together.”

continued...



The Producer...

KEVIN ARCHIBALD and his wife Glenda farm 2000 acres of cropland and pasture and run a commercial cow calf operation southeast of Killarney, MB. His father Stewart, lives just next door and is also involved on the farm.

Their soil is Waskada clay loam, a fairly productive soil that is clay based and well drained. The moisture profile has been changing. “It used to be about 12 inches in a season, but in the last few years it’s increased substantially,” Archibald says. And there’s an irony in that. Archibald started farming in 1978, and says that for the next 10 years, moisture was the limiting factor on the farm. “We started zero-tilling in the early ‘80s because then we had nothing but drought. Now it’s exactly the opposite...there have been times we wondered if the rain would ever stop.” Excess moisture is the biggest cropping challenge they have.

He first planted winter wheat four years ago, and now plants 300-400 acres of the crop every year, generally Kestrel for its good disease resistance and thick canopy which is hard on weeds. His typical rotation is canola, winter wheat, peas, spring wheat, then canola. Depending on market conditions, he may substitute lentils for peas.

Why They Grow Winter Wheat continued...

Because winter wheat flowers earlier than spring wheat, it will usually flower and set seed before fusarium head blight (FHB) spores can do their damage, and this has been a major concern for producers in Archibald's area. "It spreads out the risk...it's a cultural tool for managing the severity of the fusarium problem," he says.

On the marketing side, winter wheat is a good cash crop. Killarney is the hub of a major hog feeder expansion area. The hog industry sees winter wheat as the perfect high energy feed grain, says Archibald, and with low or no vomitoxin it's very attractive to the local industry. "To ensure winter wheat markets have the opportunity to expand, we look forward to strong marketing partnerships, including the possibility of Canadian Wheat Board exemptions in the future."

Archibald also thinks about the bigger picture: the benefits to wildlife - waterfowl and songbirds nesting in stubble. "Winter wheat greens up before anything else does, and provides some early foraging for deer...without damage to the crop," he says.



Growing Challenges

Given recent high moisture conditions, the Archibalds have had to apply fungicides, usually Tilt. "It's a management decision," he says. "If the yield potential is there, \$8 an acre can save an 85 bushel crop."

Archibald notes here are challenges with both harvest and weed control. "Winter wheat seed has virtually no dormancy, and should be straight combined. If you do have to swath it, swath right in front of the combine, or only as much as you can do in a day, because any moisture can make it sprout, and fast," says Archibald. On the other hand, when it is straight combined, there are savings on machinery, fuel, and labour costs.

He ran into a problem one year with wild buckwheat, and learned he had to make sure there was adequate control in his canola field, for the whole season; otherwise seeding winter wheat can be a tremendous challenge.



Keys to Successful Production: Archibald's Advice

Archibald focuses on three major activities in growing a good crop of winter wheat: planning, timing, and seed depth. Because he plants the wheat into canola stubble, there are two crops involved in the plan. "The canola must be planted as early as possible so it can be harvested by the time the winter wheat is ready to be seeded. Seeding between August 25 to September 10 is the optimum window for highest yield and best winter hardiness potential, and the most perfect date is September 1," he says. During seeding time, he wants to have every detail planned out and everything ready to go the first wet morning, including a clean truck with seed in it.

He seeds 300 viable seeds per square yard into standing stubble, the taller the better. Seed depth is critical. "Plant shallow, even into dust, because depth is more important than moisture," he advises. "That plant has to get out of the ground quickly once it does germinate - that's the key." Archibald likes to seed at a depth of 1/2" and no deeper than 3/4".

The only fertilizer he puts in with the seed is phosphorus, and on his soil, a bit of copper. Winter wheat is a high user of nitrogen, which Archibald applies in the spring as early as possible. While he realizes farmers may be tempted to use lower cost urea, he believes ammonium nitrate is a necessity. On a variety like Kestrel, he recommends 120 pounds of actual N. With Falcon, he goes up to 150 pounds without any lodging problems. "New growers are scared of those rates, but with a yield potential of 85 plus bushels per acre, the actual cost of growing it is low, even with the high fertilizer prices."

