

## **Hard Winter Wheat Tour of Kansas – 2010**

May 3 through the 6th, I had the opportunity to participate in the Wheat Quality Council's, 2010 Hard Winter Wheat Tour. It gave me a chance to see the Kansas wheat crop up close and given the relatively wet winter, a chance to better assess crop prospects.

The WQC Wheat Tour makes absolutely no claim about being official in any way. The results are not reported to USDA, nor are they used by USDA-NASS as they work to develop public estimates of crop size.

So what is the tour? The WQC Hard Winter Wheat Tour represents a great opportunity for a producer of Kansas wheat to visit, interact, question and be questioned, and ultimately learn more about the wheat they grow and the wheat industry that purchases, transports, trades and processes it. You will never be around a more comprehensive and diverse group of wheat industry participants. Folks on the tour include the people who buy your wheat directly, from elevator managers to grain company merchandisers; it includes milling company personnel, bakers and food processors, and importers from around the world, who want to see where and how the wheat they buy is grown. You'll encounter shippers of wheat, grain traders, market consultants, the media and price analysts. Participants include state and federal agricultural employees, university personnel and wheat organization representatives. All in all, it is an incredibly diverse group of people, from all around the world with varying backgrounds and perspectives, and I'd argue, some of the nicest people you'll ever meet.

The tour covers all of Kansas plus parts of Nebraska and Oklahoma, and normally consists of 12 to 16 cars, with three to four people each traveling the state on six different routes to scout winter wheat crop conditions as of the first few days of May. Participants are rotated each day, giving you the chance to develop a network of people to keep in contact with over the years.

Each car has at least one rider with several years of experience who can help newcomers, and there are also agronomists and extension specialists who participate on the tour and are available to help answer any technical questions during the evening reports when the whole group gets back together. The tour relies on the theory of large numbers. Each car will make anywhere from 12 to 20 stops, so over the three day tour, more than four hundred Kansas wheat fields will be examined. At each stop we measure and examine the wheat (four to eight separate stalk counts per stop), making a yield estimate based on formulas provided by the Kansas Ag Statistics Service. We also scout for diseases, pests, moisture conditions and any other factors that could have an influence on yield or crop quality. Again, while the results are unofficial, each car works very hard to accurately assess the current state of the Kansas wheat crop.

As I mentioned earlier, the WQC Wheat Tour makes absolutely no claim about being official in any way, yet not only do market and agricultural reporters participate on the tour, they report results each day. And yes, while tour results have sometimes been associated in the press with wheat price declines, if you look back over the years, WQC Wheat Tour results have also been associated with price increases on many occasions.

It is important to understand that wheat prices change every day and that the "wheat market" will trade information; official or unofficial, accurate or inaccurate, as part of that process. The benefit of publicly reported information such as the WQC Wheat Tour and much more importantly, USDA crop and livestock reports, is that by making this information public and available to ALL, we better ensure an even playing field; one where all market participants – including farmers – have the same information. If for some reason, USDA crop and livestock reports were no longer funded and/or

available to ALL, I guarantee you, the companies that buy and process agricultural products would be working to gather crop and livestock information. It would cost them but they would pay whatever necessary because it impacts their bottom line, and they would not share that information with farmers. We need accurate crop and livestock information in order to make more informed marketing and management decisions and we need that information to be public and available to all market participants.

### **First Night – May 3**

The WQC Hard Winter Wheat Tour begins each year in Manhattan, Kansas. A brief overview of the tour, what it is about and how it works is provided and participants introduce themselves to the rest of the group. Dr. James Shroyer, Kansas State University, Extension Agronomy Leader and Wheat Specialist, provides an overview of the crop, noting current conditions and preparing participants for what they may encounter over the next few days. Lastly, Glenda Shepler, our Director of Kansas Agricultural Statistics, shares with the group some basic mathematic equations for use in estimating yield based on the number of stalks per linear foot of row (using a rolling ten-year average of actual data). Other factors that come into play with the equations are row width, stage of growth, location within the state and average estimates of head weight.

### **Day One – May 4**

I travel the “pink route” every year and try to take each of my stops in the same general area. This year on day one I had the privilege of riding with Ron Lindgren, the Central Lab Manager with ADM, Laura Aday, the Lab Manager with Cereal Food Processors and David Reed, farmer and Kansas Farm Bureau member from Rooks County.

We left Manhattan at 6:30 am and traveled east along highway 18 making four stops, one each in Geary and Dickinson and two stops in Ottawa County. Based on the stalk counts, the average yield from the first three stops was nearly 47 bushels and soil moisture was great as we were able to push a four foot soil probe all the way. At our first Ottawa County stop, we visited with the producer who informed us that the wheat was planted after wheat (in 2009) and that our 42 bushel estimate was in line with their expectations. All in all, while the stem counts indicated decent wheat (40 bushel range), the fields often “looked” better than the calculated yields suggested.

From Bennington we proceeded north on highway 135, making one more stop in northern Ottawa County (34 bushel estimate) before turning west on highway 24 and making a stop in Cloud County. I’ve been on this tour some 10 years and I believe the wheat in the Ottawa and Cloud Counties is as far along as I’ve seen, ranging from late boot to early heading.

Proceeding west into Mitchell and Osborne Counties, soil moisture was a bit more variable (3’ & 2’) and estimated yields were running in the mid 30’s to 40 bushels. We stopped and visited with the folks at AgMark and the Farmway Coop who indicated that a fair amount of fungicide had been applied to protect against wheat rust.

We made two stops in Rooks County, having lunch with Rooks County Farm Bureau member Stephen Bigge. On behalf of myself, Laura Aday and Ron Lindgren, I’d like to thank David Reed, Stephen Bigge and the Rooks County Farm Bureau for their hospitality. After lunch we drove west of Stockton and made a stop at one of David’s no-till fields. While the subsoil moisture was great, a full 4’ profile, because the field was planted after soybean harvest, it went in much later than David had wanted and like several of the late planted fields we observed, had less tillering than normal.

We then continued west on highway 24 making one stop each in Graham, Sheridan and Thomas Counties. As we moved west, moisture continued to be more than adequate, the stands “looked” great but stem counts continued to indicate yields in the mid to upper 30 bushel range.

### **Day One Tour Summary**

We ended the day in Colby and the group was joined by a few producers from western Kansas. There is a general meeting where each car reports their findings. For my car (pink route) we made 13 stops in all and our estimated yield was 39 bushels per acre. The three-car, pink route average was also 39 bushels per acre, and the entire six route, 15 car, 213 stop average yield was 40.7 bushels per acre, which compares to 41 (2009) and 45 (2008). Overall there was very little disease (short of some powdery mildew) and no insects to speak of that might hold back yields, and if temperatures don't get too hot, yields could potentially climb along much of this route. Compared to earlier years, I thought the wheat in spots was a little further ahead.

### **Day Two – May 5**

The day two “pink route” is one of the longer routes, so my car left Colby at 6:00 am and traveled west on I-70 to Goodland. I had the privilege of riding with Jason Lamprecht, KASS, Antoinette Brumm, a flour merchandiser with Horizon Milling and Dan Ellsworth, a wheat merchandiser with DeBruce Grain.

From Goodland we proceeded south along highway 27, making stops, in Sherman, Wallace and northern Greeley Counties. Stands looked great, subsoil moisture was great (4') but estimated yields were less spectacular at 35, 38 and 38 bushels respectively. We arrived at the Tribune Branch Experiment Station and briefly toured their over-sized crop rotation, demonstration plots and visited with Dr. Alan Schlegel.

We continued south along highway 27, stopping at a field of KFB member Bill Luebber's in southern Greeley County. After visiting with Bill we travelled to Syracuse, turned east on highway 400, making stops in both Hamilton and Kearney Counties. Up to this point, we had made 7 stops and while soil moisture continued to be excellent, estimated yields continued to be a somewhat disappointing 36.5 bushels.

We continued to proceed east making a stop just west of Garden City and then headed south before turning east on Plymell Road and on into Gray and Ford Counties. On this leg we made four stops in all, the crop seemed to be a little further along than normal (boot to very early heading), soil moisture was short, some of the wheat showed signs of drought stress but estimated yields were better, averaging 40 bushels. We stopped at Eva's Kitchen in Montezuma and met Joe Jury for lunch; we also stopped at one of Joe's fields.

Our final two stops were along highway 54/400 in Kiowa and Pratt Counties. Subsoil moisture was short, fields were showing signs of drought stress, we saw a little wheat rust and the crop was mostly flowering. As a result, estimated yields were variable, 33 and 53 bushels.

### **Day Two Summary**

We ended the day in Wichita and the group was joined by a few producers from central Kansas. For my car (pink route) we again made 13 stops and our estimated yield was 39 bushels per acre. The three-car, pink route average was also 39 bushels per acre and the day two, six route, 15 car, 215 stop average yield was 39.9 bushels per acre, which compares to 40 (2009) and 41 (2008). Overall, while disease levels were higher than on day one, I believe overall levels were less than in previous years.

The entire, two-day, six route, 428 stop average yield was 40.3 bushels per acre, which compares to 41 (2009) and 43 (2008). Lastly, the Oklahoma Wheat Commission joined the group and reported their estimates, including a 34 bushel yield and an Oklahoma crop of 141 million bushels compared to 77 million a year ago.

### **Final Wheat Tour Comments**

When the WQC Wheat Tour is complete, participants are asked to provide an estimate of the Kansas wheat crop. To do this we have to come up with an estimate of abandoned acres, subtract that from the 8.6 million acres planted last fall and multiply that by our estimate of statewide yield. All in all I came away feeling pretty good about our prospects but clearly, there is a long ways to go before the Kansas wheat crop is in the bin. I'm estimating that we'll ultimately abandon a little more than 340,000 acres and that yields will end up a little higher than we're calculating now; say about 44 bushels, resulting in a 363 million bushel crop.

The unofficial, weighted average WQC Tour participant estimate was 333 million bushels.

I strongly recommend that all wheat producers at least once in your life, participate in the WQC Tour, or at the very least, come to the day one (Colby) or day two (Wichita) summary meetings. The tour truly represents a golden opportunity for producers of wheat to interact with downstream handlers of your product. I guarantee, you'll never be around a more comprehensive and diverse group of wheat industry participants. If you'd like more information about the Wheat Quality Council Hard Winter Wheat Tour or would like to participate in the 2011 tour, or if a County Farm Bureau would like a short presentation about the tour and wheat estimates in general, please feel free to contact me at (785) 587-6103 or [nelsonm@kfb.org](mailto:nelsonm@kfb.org).

Other information on the tour can be found on the Wheat Quality Council web site at [www.wheatqualitycouncil.org](http://www.wheatqualitycouncil.org) or by contacting Ben Handcock at (605) 224-5187.



**“Six Routes across Kansas”**



**“Counting Stalks”**



**“Colby Crop Discussion”**



**“KFB Member, David Reed ‘Reporting’”**