Crop Solutions that Work

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Is the Wheat Crop Going to Make It?

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Poor planting conditions last fall, mild temperatures and above normal precipitation through the first few months of winter have certainly left the wheat crop in less than ideal condition. Then to make things worse, cold temperatures and wind chill last week with virtually no snow cover has many growers wondering if they will have a wheat crop to harvest this summer.

The simply answer to this question is it is just too early to tell, but there are some factors to be thinking about over the next couple of months that will help when the decision needs to be made.

One of the most critical factors is determining the winter survival of the crop. Brown, dried leaves do not necessarily indicate winter injury, and green overwintering leaves are not a sure sign that the crop has survived. The only way to properly assess if a wheat plant is still alive is to remove a few plants from the field on a day when the soil is thawing.

Get the plants into a warm environment quickly to avoid any damage to the exposed crown root. Place the crowns in a moist environment using potting soil or a paper towel and leave them in a warm room where they will be exposed to light for some of the day.

Make sure the crowns of the plant do not dry out. Crown tissue that has been damaged will turn brown quickly, while healthy tissue will remain white. This will give you an early indication if the plants are still viable in the field.

White Root Growth indicates Healthy Plants

Evaluating your stands population is also important because it is a key component to the overall yield potential of the crop. Simply count the number of plants per foot of row at several locations in the field. The general guideline is if the average is above 15 plants per foot and the stand is uniform then it is worth keeping. If your stand is thin an early application of Nitrogen should be considered to help induce the plant to tiller more. Early weed control is also very important.

Table 1. Relative yield potential of winter wheat based on early spring stand counts.

Plants/foot of row	Rating	Yield Potential (%)
20	Excellent	100
10-15	Very Good	100
7-10	Fair/Good	75-95
less than 7	Poor	<75

Other considerations are looking at how important the wheat crop is to your own farming operation. Livestock producers may put more value on the straw and summer manure application than a cash cropper that is looking mostly at yield. Look at other cropping options as far as yield and price opportunities and compare that to potentials for your wheat. Partial field losses, crop insurance coverage, extra spring work load, and effects on crop rotation should also be considered on an individual basis as their importance will vary.

When making your final assessment in the spring, viable wheat plants should be given a couple of weeks of good weather to grow. In a lot of cases those poor looking plants will look much different in this time frame. If it is decided that the damage is extensive and a decision to reseed is made, the surviving wheat plants should be destroyed (glyphosate burn-down) as soon as possible to minimize loss of soil moisture and a tie up of soil nutrients.

Deciding on whether to keep or replant a marginal crop is always a tough decision to make thinking through some of these factors early may help in that decision later on. If you have any questions or need some help in assessing you wheat crop, contact your local AGRIS or Wanstead Farmers' Co-operative branch.