

March 2008

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### **Things to know before you plant spring wheat**

By Greg Andrews, Pierce County Ag. Agent

Madison, Wis. – Oats have been the largest small grain acreage crop in Wisconsin because it is robust and seldom needs any management between seeding and harvest. This year many farmers are considering planting spring wheat instead of oats due to high grain prices. They will plant spring wheat as a nurse crop for alfalfa. University of Wisconsin-Extension specialists advise farmers to be aware of a few differences when changing to wheat.

Spring wheat yields increase with seeding rate up to about 45 seeds per square foot (about 2.5 bushels per acre). This allows for 10 to 15 percent of the seed not germinating; resulting in a final stand of about 40 wheat plants per square foot.

The recommended seeding rate for spring wheat on top of alfalfa is 18 plants per square foot (1 bushel wheat per acre) – higher rates will stress the alfalfa more. This will result in poor stands in some cases and may cause reduced alfalfa yields from the field in future years.

One option for farmers to consider is planting the wheat at a full seeding rate this spring and then planting alfalfa in early August after the wheat has been harvested. Fall seedings of alfalfa work well if adequate moisture is available for stand establishment. Volunteer wheat plants will need to be controlled with herbicide.

Farmers planting wheat on top of alfalfa should consider planting a potato leaf hopper resistant variety of alfalfa. This insect can come into fields under a cover crop and attack the alfalfa. Infestations of this insect in the seeding year can reduce alfalfa stand and yields in future years.

Nitrogen fertilization or credits for the wheat seeded with alfalfa should not exceed 40 pounds per acre as higher rates will produce more top growth to compete more severely with the alfalfa seedlings.

Farmers should make sure that wheat seed is treated with fungicide to reduce the risk of loose smut. If left untreated, this disease can severely reduce final yields. Further information regarding seed fungicides is available in the Pest Management of Wisconsin Field Crops-2008 (UW-Extension, A3646).

Additionally, farmers planting spring wheat should be prepared to watch for plant diseases and spray with fungicide if necessary. Spring wheat is much more susceptible than winter wheat to a number of diseases that if not treated, can severely limit yield.

Expect spring wheat to yield two-thirds of what an average winter wheat crop may yield. In addition to yield return farmers will depend on protein content and market availability. Few local elevators in Wisconsin accept spring wheat therefore transportation costs must be factored into your decision. Also, due to our environment, protein content may prove limiting therefore select and grow only those varieties that have excellent protein scores.

If managed correctly spring wheat can provide excellent additional income this year provided farmers are aware of the differences in management between wheat and oats and respond with the additional inputs required for good yield.

While Western Wisconsin is not a prime growing region for spring wheat, marketing opportunities are most favorable since their proximity is near the Twin City area.

Growers are cautioned that contracting spring wheat has both risks and rewards. The risks associated with not meeting the complex grading requirement are real. The Pierce County Extension Ag. Agent website has several resources that explain those risks. A sample budget for growing spring wheat is available on the website.

More information is available at <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/cty/pierce/ag/index.html> or [http://soybean.uwex.edu/documents/Spring\\_wheat.pdf](http://soybean.uwex.edu/documents/Spring_wheat.pdf).

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