
International Perspective Farm Business Management in Kazakhstan

By Al Scholz

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Mother Nature always bats last!

Farmers on both the Prairies and in Central Asia are losing acreage. In the Prairies, it's because of flooded land; in Central Asia it's because of a desperate lack of moisture, where the only significant precipitation this spring has been the snow melt in early April.

An earlier commentary raved about the speed of seeding - 38,300 acres in 15 days. That was made easier by no interruptions from rain. Now we're regretting that success.

More damaging than just the lack of rain are the howling westerly winds across the Central Asian steppe. The third major wind storm came through Saturday night, June 12th and lasted all day Sunday.



|Whirl-winds are common with the +30°C temperatures and +80 km winds

Even if the steady winds are strong, they're tolerable. The problem is the resulting dust storms from the heavily tilled summer-fallow fields that are all too common across the steppe.

Part of my work as a research agronomist is to promote reduced tillage and moisture conservation – and this year farmers are getting a great lesson on the risks of conventional tillage, particularly the practice of black summer-fallow. Thousands of hectares are being re-seeded across the grain belt – and now it's a race against the imminent fall frost. The average frost free period is 105-120 days. So, re-seeding late maturing crops in mid-June will be a gamble against Mother Nature.



A June 7th wind storm took out this canola field in 3-4th leaf stage

The fact that the average field size ranges from 400-500 ha [1,000–1,500 acres] makes the fallow land even more vulnerable to wind erosion. Interestingly, during the Soviet era, strip farming was a common practice for this very situation – to reduce the inevitable wind erosion. Modern day Kazakh's have been seduced by grandeur and are paying the price in lost soil fertility and reduced profits.



Sunday, June 13th – re-seeding part of a canola field during the third wind storm

Most farmers are re-seeding Argentine canola – some for the second time – because the price is higher than wheat. On the demonstration areas, I've convinced them to re-seed 2,000 acres of blown out canola with early maturing wheat because wheat can be planted deep into moisture for quick germination, will withstand the wind blast, reduce the risk of a fall frost and add straw to the land for next year.

While the ubiquitous dry heat has slowed crop development, the insects and perennial weeds appear to be managing just fine. The seed treatment for flea beetles has worn off the slow-growing crop and the flea beetles are aggressively attacking what's left, requiring an unanticipated and costly spraying operation.



Can you count them? – How many flea beetles are on these seedlings?

In some ways, Kazakhstan in 2010 is just like Saskatchewan in the early 1980's. The region would do well to heed those lessons learned on the Prairies as improved soil conservation practices also lead to reduced costs and increased profits.

More next week ...

Al Scholz is working as a research agronomist on a 5,200 ha [12,300 acre] demonstration farm in Northern Kazakhstan from May to October 2010. See his Blog for more information at www.awellfedworld.com/blog.