Grain and Rain

The average price for soft white wheat in Portland for January was $4.83 per bushel, while club prices averaged $8.20. Barley was at $125 per ton.

Precipitation as reported from the Sherman Experiment Station was 3.01 inches.

Last month we noted that many reports greatly exceeded the Station’s report. Investigation reveals two culprits for the differences. First is the way snowfall is measured. Acceptable ways from the National Weather Service include melting the snow accumulated in your gage and reading the amount and simply measuring the average snow at several sites and converting that into precipitation by assuming the snow water content at one-tenth of an inch of moisture per inch of snow. So a 4 inch snow depth would be reported as .40 inches of moisture.

That’s a good rule of thumb as a rough estimate, but we all know that different snows have different moisture contents. We’ve seen light powdery snows that drift easily and may not have a quarter of inch in a foot of accumulation and we have seen wet snows that set a heavy blanket and are full of water. These will turn to mush much easier, like our recent snow events. If you choose to use this method, just be sure to be consistent in your reporting.

The other factor in the differences we had reported last month is in the timing of the readings. Again the National Weather Service recommends that for consistency, you read the gage at the same time each day. Anything that falls after that time is recorded as received in the next day’s report. The Station does that and reads at 8 am each day, including December 31. Anything falling after 8 am on that day shows in the January 1 total. Many of the reporters admitted that to get the full total for last day of the year they wait until late in the day to take their final reading for the day and for the year. December 31, 2009 saw it rain most all day, which added to some reporters total and hence showed a discrepancy over the Station’s. Again, the best thing is to keep your reading practices consistent. Precipitation on your farm is what is going to grow your crop.
CRP Notes

Back in 1985, the USDA introduced a program that was designed to stem the tide of low prices, an over-abundance of production and reducing the stress induced suicides and homicides resulting from a very depressed farm economy crisis. The program also had some conservation benefits as a side-line. The program was introduced as the Conservation Reserve Program. It was designed to retire certain acres from production, theoretically limiting supply and boosting farm product prices.

That 10 year program is finally winding down and producers are facing some choices as these enrolled lands now seek a new source of revenue. Do you let it lie idle or do you graze it? Do you ruin your stock or lease it out? Do you farm it, do you farm the whole thing and how do you get it back into production? Do you seek out some retiring CRP lands in order to expand your operation?

In 2010, we’ll see CRP contract expirations of 8,200 acres in Sherman County and 5,600 acres in Wasco County. In 2011, that increases to 32,800 in Sherman and 6,200 in Wasco. Assuming no extensions are granted we should see an end to all contracts by 2017.

At the recent Direct Seed Cropping System Conference, a good amount of time was directed at the “how to” portion with the key point of not losing all the soil benefits one has gained in the 25 years of the program.

Recognizing that many acres will return to farming, they emphasized to do so using direct seed methods. In studies in Washington, CRP land coming out under the plow achieved an erosion rate of 14 tons per acre while similar land coming out using direct seed practices lost only .6 (six-tenths) of a ton per acre.

We know that many acres will not come out. These are lands that folks said should never have been planted in the first place because of slope, depth, rocky conditions or readability. Leaving many of the acres in grass will help protect other lands within the field and as continue to serve a useful function like allowing for the slow release of water into creeks such as Buck Hollow and others.

For those acres you do plan to farm, those taking lands out already have reported some of the following concerns and solutions.

Sheep fescue, while good at holding the soil is also so narrow-leafed that it has very poor nutrition and feed value. It is also tough to eliminate with gypsyosate. One grower reported success using two applications of gypsyosate, the first at 48 ounces the second at 40. Rates may vary with gypsyosate knock-offs. Another reported using similar rates and found they still shovel escaped plants out of their wheat crops, but notes once you chop them off at the roots they stay dead.

Getting through the heavy cover. Many found that much of the material on the surface was brittle from age, but still, it was best to use coulters ahead of the drill openers to cut trough not only the residue on the surface but the root masses below.

Nobody recommended spring planting grains for a first crop. In fact, CRP rules regarding take out mean a long wait if spring planting is your option.

According the FSA office, you cannot begin to remove the CRP grasses before July 1, without some penalty, adjusted on your CRP payment. The earliest you can start is May 1 and anything between then and July receives a pro-rated payment reduction depending on when you actually start.

Before you do anything, be sure to check with your FSA office. The CRP may require a new Conservation Plan. That may also apply if you plan to graze these fields.

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Grazing will be difficult on CRP as livestock will find the “woolly” plants, those with 2-4 years of old growth a pain in the nose. Research at OSU showed that as few as 3 old dry stems are enough to keep cattle from sticking their faces into the grass no matter how hungry they may be. Again, schedule some time early with NRCS and FSA to explore your options.

**Rangeland and CRP Management Workshop**

Addressing a timely issue, be sure to attend this workshop at the Sherman Co Fairgrounds on February 18, from 10 am to 3:30 pm. Speakers from BLM and Oregon Department of Ag highlight this practical agenda. No need to pre-register and no fee to attend. Workshop includes the lunch.

**SWCD Annual Meetings**

Attend one or both, these will be good. The Sherman County SWCD hosts their annual meeting on Tuesday, February 9 at the Senior Center in Moro. The social hour begins at 5 pm and is followed by dinner catered by Paradise Rose for only $10 per diner. Guest speakers that evening are Kathy McCullough and Julie Reynolds sharing some great pictures and stories on the 1964 Christmas Flood. That event spurred more conservation in the region than anything else.

Because we need a head count for the cook, you will want to pre-register by noon on Monday Feb 8 by calling Krista at 541-565-3551 ext.3.

Then on Thursday February 18, Wasco County SWCD holds its annual meeting at the Discovery Center near The Dalles, beginning with the social half hour at 5:30 pm and dinner at 6 pm. Be sure to pre-register so the cooks know to prepare your choice of prime rib or the salmon dinner. Either will be $20. To pre-register, Call Tammy at 541-298-8559, ext 3.

Special speaker for the evening is George Taylor, former state climatologist. Taylor is a familiar voice in this region and brings an accurate, lively message to the event.

**Open Dates for Local Meetings**

Both Counties will again see the popular sessions featuring SWCD, Extension, NRCS, FSA and others coming soon.

In **Wasco County, the Neighborhood Meetings** will be offered to all on February 10 at Maupin Community Park Center at 9 am and at Wamic at the Sportsman Pub and Grub at 1 pm. Sessions repeat February 11 at 9 am at Cousins Restaurant in The Dalles and at 1 pm in Dufur at the Catholic Parish Hall. You may get an invite from one of your neighbors but if not, be sure to make of these to hear the latest.

**Sherman County** is running a bit later beginning in Moro at the Senior Center, immediately following the Marketing Breakfast on Friday February 19. (The marketing session starts at 7 am). The next public **After Hours meeting** is at 1:30 pm at the Kent Baptist Church on Tuesday February 23. Again you may get invited to a neighbor's for the same session, but if you don’t hear, you need to plan attending one of these two.
Mid Columbia Farm Enterprise Investigation

Thinking about adding or expanding a new enterprise to your operation of just adding new land? Plan to attend the Farm Enterprise Investigation Series as it continues Feb 6 at the Grange in White Salmon or Feb. 13 for the final session.

The first one examines sustainable crops, irrigation and water rights issues and the second session concentrates on sustainable animal production and grazing management.

Cost per family is $10 and you need to register by calling Tim Shatraw at 509-773-5817. He is also your best source for more information on the programs.

New Range Drills Available

The Sherman and Wasco County SWCD’s cooperated on the purchase of new range drills to assist you with all the demands for re-seeding your range. The matching drills can be pulled separately or in tandem to suit your needs. For more information or to rent these tools, contact your local SWCD.

Core Classes

If you still need a core class, there are two coming in the area of the Mid Columbia Region. The first is Tuesday February 10 starting at 1 pm at the Morrow County Extension Office in Heppner. The second one is February 18 at the Jefferson County Fairgrounds in Madras. The show starts at 8:30 am.

These may well be the last 4 hour core classes within reason in 2010.