

Agriculture by Andy Olson

Weather crisis in the U.S. corn belt

Besides battling the food cartels, farmers are battling the elements, and the 1993 corn crop looks poor.

The 1993 planting season in the U.S. corn belt has been characterized by abnormally cool temperatures coupled with water-logged fields in many core areas. The planting began about one month later than normal, and has been in fits and starts because of frequent rainstorms across the belt. Farmers are looking at the sky and asking, "Why are the majority of the days so cool, cloudy, and frequently wet?"

Much of the answer can be connected to the atmospheric shading caused by the 1991 eruption of Mt. Pinatubo in the Philippines. That massive eruption pumped sulfur into the atmosphere which bonded with water droplets, forming sulfuric acid, thus blocking radiation from the Sun. The shading affects summertime conditions more drastically because there is more sunlight to shade. Currently, the shading of the temperate zones are 30% of the peak, and still reflecting radiation.

The 1993 planting season is the opposite of 1992. The 1992 growing season produced record corn and soybean yields, and production was actually aided by the atmospheric shading. A dry, warm spring provided an ideal beginning; and when the rains, followed by a cool summer, materialized, a bumper crop resulted. The central and southern corn belt experienced ideal temperatures in 1992, as opposed to the scorching heat of previous years. Normally, St. Louis, Missouri would be blistering under oppressive summertime heat. Such sunlight intensity overstresses crops because soil fertility has been gradually reduced and the ability of these soils

to compensate in times of peak nutrient demand no longer measures up to essential crop needs.

The central and southern corn crops in recent years have been falling apart under high sunlight intensity, but reduced sunlight intensity in 1992 did not overstress the crop, and a dramatic yield occurred. Observers should pay close attention to what is happening. The lower zones of the corn belt can no longer produce a viable crop under high sunlight intensity!

Then, in the northern corn belt in 1992, a near disaster occurred. The ideal spring most farmers experienced was the only saving grace, because the summertime weather turned cold. St. Louis experienced Minnesota's summer. The growing degree days (GDDs) necessary to produce a mature crop were marginal, as frost ended the growing season last September.

The quality of the corn and soybeans in the northern belt was characterized by low test weight, spoilage due to incomplete proteins, moldings, etc. A frost just one week earlier would have produced mush. How does the 1992 crop year compare with the current one?

The two planting springs have been like night and day, and the summer GDDs must increase rapidly to achieve 1992's crop production. The core of the corn belt (the southern one-third of Minnesota, Iowa, and Missouri) are struggling just to finish planting. For example, as of the second week of June, Iowa had planted only 45% of its soybeans, and Missouri only 32% of its soybeans. Problems extend into South Dakota, Wisconsin, and Michigan as well.

However, the eastern and western sections of the corn belt are further advanced, although the crop was still planted late.

Just to demonstrate how desperate some farmers are, one only has to observe the smoke rising above their fields. The wet 1992 harvest did not permit much fall tillage. Consequently, many farmers are faced with an untouched insulating mat of cornstalks covering their fields. These fields are slow to dry and farmers desperate to plant are burning their cornstalks. The area looks like Kuwait, only this smoke is white. The organic carbon, or humus, which normally would be recycled back to the soil via the residue, now goes up in smoke, lost forever. It has been estimated that burning accelerates the loss of organic carbon five times over the normal removal of a grain crop from the land. This needless loss of organic matter is probably one of the most devastating things a farmer can do to ruin the productivity of farmland. Where are the farmer harassing environmental watchdogs? They're too busy running after their own tails to even understand the consequences of destroying soil organic carbon.

The 1993 crop, if it is planted, already is 16% behind the 32-year average of GDDs (for the second week of June) at the Southwestern Minnesota Agricultural Experiment Station. Therefore, the sun has to shine intensely between June 15 and Aug. 1 to make up for a cool, wet spring. This year, it appears that the central and southern corn belt cannot repeat with record yields to counterbalance the problems of the northern corn belt.

The Chicago Board of Trade did not reflect the potential 1993 harvest shortfall. The looters are having too much fun stealing from the farmers to comprehend the real world of production agriculture.