

Adjusting Corn Management for a Late Start

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It seems that corn planting dates have gotten earlier and earlier in recent years. That is probably the result of warmer spring temperatures coupled with improved hybrid cold tolerance and improved seed treatments for corn. We had an “old-fashioned winter” this year with lots of snow that lingered for a long time, and the weather has been a bit crazy this spring to say the least. April brought heavy rains, a few tornadoes, high winds and very few days above 60 degrees here in Central New York. It hasn't been much better in many other areas of the Northeast. It is no wonder that very little activity has been seen in CNY fields and the prospects for “timely” corn planting diminishes with each passing day. This will force many farmers to squeeze more work into fewer days.

When things do dry out enough to plant corn, farmers should focus on anything they can do to expedite crop establishment and keep loss of yield and quality to a minimum. Below are a few things to keep in mind:



Farmers are eager to head to fields to plant corn

1. Yield loss from “mudding the seed in” may be greater than waiting for soils to be dry enough for the necessary tillage and planting operations. In fact, tillage and planting when the soil is too wet may impact yields for several years...and not in a good way!
2. Keep tillage to a minimum or combine several operations in one pass to avoid further delays in planting. Most new planters provide relatively good seed placement in “trashy” or crusted seedbeds.
3. Let's assume that you took care of all of the routine maintenance last winter (clean/replace seed tubes, replace worn out parts and coulters, disc openers are aligned correctly etc.). If not, there's no better time than right now, especially if it is still raining out! And while you are at it, make sure your corn planter is adjusted according to the operator's manual to get seed planted at the right depth and spacing.
4. Calibrate actual seed drop under field conditions (not in the farm lane) at normal planting speeds and seeding rates. Calibrate the pesticide and fertilizer attachments at the same time. Make sure the planter toolbar is parallel to the ground as well, since this will affect disc opener depth, press wheel efficiency, and seed-to-soil contact. This step is a “delay” that will pay for itself. The last thing you need at this point is an avoidable yield loss resulting from improper plant population, spacing, depth of planting or fertilizer placement.
5. Generally speaking, corn should be planted when soil temperatures are near 50 degrees F. Seed will emerge in about 3 weeks if soil temperature is 50 - 55. It will emerge in a week or less if the soil is 70 degrees. Soils aren't drying out or warming up as early as usual this year, but they could warm up very quickly once they do dry out. This is both good and bad. If soils in late-planted fields do warm up quickly, germination and emergence should be faster and more uniform. This is good in that you may be able to decrease the seeding rate a bit in anticipation of a higher emergence and survival. Unfortunately, faster emergence will also shorten the window of opportunity to apply herbicides at the correct time (relative to crop and weed growth). Timely scouting will be crucial to get pre-emergence and post-emergence herbicides applied correctly.
6. Depth of planting is another consideration. A 2-inch depth is recommended under “ideal” conditions. Early planted corn should be planted a bit more shallow, say 1½ inch, because soils are still quite wet and take longer to warm up. Corn planted in mid-late May should be planted at 2 inches, or slightly deeper if the soil is warmed up and drying out quickly.

7. Consider options that will allow N - P - K applications at planting vs. having to wait for a broadcast application of nutrients before planting. Unless P and K levels are deficient, you may also be able to use a lower rate of starter fertilizer since soils will probably be warmer. Additional N can be sidedressed as needed based on PSNT results.
8. Don't worry about switching hybrid maturities unless planting is delayed to late May or early June. According to research done by Bill Cox at Cornell in 2009 and 2010, there is very limited grain yield loss, if any, for corn planted in Central to Western New York from May 15 - 20th compared with corn planted from April 20 - 25th. He agrees that there is no need to "mud it in" if soil conditions are still wet in early May. Grain moisture will be a few units higher at harvest though, so planting an earlier hybrid is a consideration if planting drags on until late May or early June (and if you can get seed for an earlier hybrid). That may not be as critical for silage as it is for grain.
9. As I mentioned above, planting delays compress the time line at a very busy time of year. Things can get really dicey if you are faced with the decision of planting corn or harvesting forages on time (not to mention staying on top of spray schedules). If you can't do both at the same time, it is generally easier to offset a reduction in corn silage or grain yield than it is to make up for the production losses resulting from feeding over mature, poor-quality haylage. So, attempting to get haylage harvested on time is probably your best option most years. The price of corn (over \$7 per bushel as I write this) might change the economics just a bit this year, so you will have to push the pencil to figure that one out for yourself.
10. Regardless of corn planting date or haylage harvest date, it is more important than ever to get the most out of your homegrown feeds by testing them and using that information to provide a balanced ration for your livestock!



Chopping hay crop silage in Onondaga County

PRICE OF CORN (per bushel)
729.25 cents per bushel
Daily change of -29.75 (-3.92%)
Corn Quote Update Apr-29-11 7:23AM