Time to scout wheat for growth stage and plant density

Source: Carrie Knott, director of the UK Research and Education Center

Now is the time to scout your wheat fields for growth stage and plant density before the wheat goes into winter dormancy. Knowing the growth stage and overall plant density now can help you prepare for possible issues in the spring.

University of Kentucky grain crops specialists have received some reports of advanced wheat with excessive plant density, especially in Central Kentucky. There are additional reports of particularly small wheat with very few plants per square foot in other areas of the state, even in wheat that was planted on time.

Typically, we do not have freeze damage before the wheat goes dormant, but extreme advanced growth can make the crop susceptible. Due to the large size of some of the state’s wheat, it may run this risk. Even if the crop sustains winter freeze damage, the wheat should tiller in the spring with minimal impacts to yield. However, the wheat is going to look bad possibly this winter and especially come spring. Knowing what to expect, can help alleviate some fears in the spring.

Small wheat or low plant densities may signal another potential issue. If the wheat remains small and low plant densities persist into spring, it may be a sign that yields may not be that great. This can influence your input decisions. You may want to split your nitrogen application, increasing it to half of your total nitrogen application for the crop when the wheat reaches Feekes 3, rather than the usual 30% of nitrogen. This can encourage growth and reduce yield losses. On the other hand, if the wheat looks poor, you may want to reduce certain inputs, such as early season fungicides, because yield potential may not be the greatest. You should never eliminate the fungicide application at flowering (Feekes 10.5.1), which is meant to protect against head diseases, such as Fusarium head blight.

For more information about scouting and growth staging wheat, contact the (COUNTY NAME) office of the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service.

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