

Optimistic spring planting outlook despite variable weather conditions

**BY KALEY PIEPER
FOR THE FENCE POST**

March and April marked the windiest spring on record in the United States. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture Weekly Weather and Crop Bulletin, storm systems crossing the Central Plains, coupled with high temperatures in March fueled dry, windy weather that has affected topsoil moisture conditions.

However, forecasted precipitation gives farmers optimism on the spring planting season. The end of March marked record-warm spring weather. Record-setting highs for March 17 included 85 degrees F in Lincoln, Neb., and 81 degrees F in Russell, Kan.

High temperatures and wind are a bad combination for topsoil. According to the USDA Bulletin, around half of Colorado and Kansas topsoil moisture was rated as short or very short in the last week of March. In the northern plains, topsoil moisture conditions are even lower, with Wyoming at 68% and Nebraska at 67%.

On March 14, the National Weather Service reported wind speeds of 75-85 mph on the Colorado-Kansas border. This closed many roads when the blowing dust, low visibility and debris posed risks to drivers in the area. This dry wind negatively affects rangeland, pastures and winter grains by drying out any precipitation that topsoil receives more quickly. It also affects spring fieldwork, especially given the widespread drought across the region.

Fortunately, temperatures in the region allowed for later fieldwork in the early winter for many farmers.

“What really helped this spring is we had a warmer-than-normal fall,” explained Trey Mosier, a diversified crop farmer in Great Bend, Kan. “We were able to work in the fields until, well, Christmas.

“With not a lot of moisture to work with and the high winds, we had to be careful with any sort of fieldwork this spring. Now that the winds have died down, the lack of precipitation in the Plains region still poses a threat to spring planting.”

“Soil moisture, precipitation and soil temperature are the biggest factors on when to start planting,” said Scott Oswald, a grain farmer from Kit Carson, Colo. “Hopefully, if we get some rain, that will benefit our topsoil and the moisture can help get our soil profile right.”

DROUGHT CONDITIONS

The U.S. Drought Monitor update published March 27 showed 62% of the state of Colorado was still abnormally dry or in a state of

drought. This time last year, that measure was at only 34%.

Colorado isn't the only state affected by drought. Areas of eastern Wyoming and western Nebraska have extreme drought conditions, as classified by the U.S. Drought Monitor on April 3.

“I'm just hoping for an average year instead of a drought year,” said Oswald. “In this region, we've always had great productive ground; the limiting factor is always just moisture.”

A break from the hot and dry March conditions was accompanied by April showers, with rain and snowfall in several areas of Colorado, Kansas, Wyoming and Nebraska. This spotty precipitation provided early planting opportunities for some farmers, while others just down the road still face conditions too dry to begin spring fieldwork.

“Precipitation has been varied the last few weeks in our area,” said Oswald. “We got around three-tenths, while some closer to the state line got 2 inches out of one rain. But that's 40 miles away from us, so we didn't get that — which I would have loved if we did.”

Rain and snow are forecast to continue this week in the region. This more consistent precipitation should help soil moisture levels across Colorado, Kansas, Wyoming and Nebraska.



This irrigated wheat field in Baca County, Colo., near the Kansas state line, is still in fair condition after 85 mph mid-March winds.

PHOTO BY KALEY PIEPER

“We’re just now getting started on spring crop,” said Mosier. “We’ve got some really good rain chances coming the next week, and we’re kind of holding off until then.”

Once farmers start planting in the next few weeks, more clear predictions can be made on acreages of crop types being planted. For now, lower-than-normal commodity prices for corn and other grains coupled with high cattle prices may show some sort of prediction.

In January, cattle prices hit an all-time high. Live cattle are currently trading consistently around \$2 per pound.

The USDA forecasts a lower season average for corn prices for the 2025-26 season. The predicted price of \$4.20 per bushel is down from the current \$4.35 per bushel.

Commodity prices are a major factor in what farmers decide to plant. With this large difference in price for corn and cattle, some believe farmers will start turning to other crops to make up the difference.

“Personally, with such high cattle prices, I’m taking a few acres out of corn and soybean and turning it into hay crops like sudan, oats and maybe teft grass for a higher quality feed,” said Mosier.

Despite the dry and windy start to the spring, winter grains are still holding on to fall moisture. While topsoil is lower in moisture content, subsoil levels are still maintained.

“On the positive note, we had such good snowfall and fall moisture that a lot of our wheat and rye acres are really well established despite the wind,” said Mosier.

After a dry, windy early spring, the next few weeks will be critical for farmers across the Plains region. With a few more timely rains, topsoil moisture content will continue to improve.

All eyes are on the skies — and the markets — as spring planting begins. ❖