



Recapping a Rainy Autumn Harvest

Small farmers across the country cope with the effects of a wet autumn harvest.

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Photo courtesy Sandy Bates Bell

Andy Don Emmons and Sandy Bates Bell saw 12 inches of rain at their Central Texas farm between August and November. The Texas rains helped drought conditions, but hurt small farm harvests. Heavy rains in September and October 2009 challenged small farmers across the country planning their autumn harvests. According to the National Climatic Data Center, it was the wettest October in 115 years, with precipitation nearly twice the national long-term average. Now, small farmers have finally harvested a portion of their crops and assessed their losses.

Redeeming the South

The more than 10 inches of rain that covered South and Central Texas this fall greatly improved the damages caused by five years of drought, according to a report from the National Weather Service, but farmers still found themselves battling cool, wet conditions.

In Central Texas, Andy Don Emmons and his fiancé Sandy Bates Bell were in the middle of their second hay cutting when the rains hit. Emmons' family-owned farm received more than 12 inches since August, Bell said, causing them to lose an estimated 80 of 500 hay bales.

The couple wanted to test crops in an heirloom garden this year in an effort to be self-sustainable. Their Sept. 4 plant date got pushed back to Oct. 20, as heavy rains kept them from tilling their soil and planting their crops.

Now, the mud has dried, and daytime temperatures in the 70s and 80s have facilitated sprouting, leading Bell to hold on to an optimistic outlook.

"The soil is dry and cracking and much sandier than I would have liked, but we are crossing our fingers that 50 percent will have some yields," she said.

For small farmer Christy Weick in Mt. Hermon, La., a record amount rain of caused significantly less problems on her farm than the 2008 drought.

"There is enough moisture in the ground for our 2009 winter crops," she said, adding that the crops include ryegrass and crimson clover. "In 2008, we just gave up and what grew just grew without a second thought about it."

Compensating for Loss

In other parts of the country, where heavy rains were more of a challenge than a saving grace, small farmers had to stay flexible.

Linda Koetitz plants tomatoes, potatoes and other vegetables on her small farm in northern Utah each year to feed her family throughout the winter. This year, her crop grew one to two months late, forcing her to travel to farmers' markets for vegetables instead of her backyard garden. Once the crop blossomed, it all came at once and she had to work hard to take advantage of the harvest.

"I had to can tomatoes like crazy since I only had a small window when they were ripe before the early hard freezes came," she said.

In Maine, Karen Paro's crop harvest was less than in previous years, but she still managed to harvest and freeze some for use throughout the winter. She picked six pints of peppers, 20 quarts of green beans and an assortment of squash and zucchini; however, other crop did not make it to harvest.

"The tomatoes grew but rotted before they ripened; the watermelon and cucumber plants got stem rot and never finished growing; and the lettuce went to seed almost immediately," Paro said.

Lessons Learned



Josh Gillming's 7.5-acre farm in Kimball, Neb., saw three weeks of rainy weather with an average of 4 inches of precipitation a week. The months of August to October were the coolest on record for Nebraska, according to the NCDC.

"Because of the cool temperatures and lack of sun, most of our tomatoes didn't turn red on the vine," said Gillming, who gave gardening a go for the first time this year. "We brought our tomatoes inside. We had 30 tomato plants and probably close to 100 pounds of green tomatoes, but they did turn."

This year, Doug Gifford, a hobby farmer in northeastern Missouri, experimented with small amounts of alfalfa and wheat to feed to his farm's livestock. However, the alfalfa's aversion to moist soil hindered its growth and he worries the cool, damp weather will make a weak wheat harvest.

"Because the crop was not established in the fall like I had hoped, I will have to either delay buying more animals or buy hay from someone else," Gifford said. "That hurts my plans for raising almost all my animal feed on my own property."