Spring Conditions and Delayed Field Work

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Most Midwest farmers agree that Fall 2018 did not offer many opportunities for working ahead. Frequent rains, early snow, and freezing temperatures left little time for field work after harvest. Winter didn't open any additional windows, with snow and sub-zero temps keeping the ground locked up tight through the first week of March.

While snow cover on fields poses benefits like reduced wind erosion, insulation from frost, and increased soil moisture, the rapid melt this spring has been detrimental in areas of the Midwest like Southwest Iowa and Eastern Nebraska. The Missouri River breeched its banks and toppled the levees constructed to stop it with water entering farmsteads, towns, and grain elevators and leaving a trail of destruction in its wake. In other areas, the rapid snow melt created washouts, ponding, and excessive moisture in the soil profile.

Excess moisture will delay fertilizer applications like anhydrous ammonia (NH_3), a common form of nitrogen applied prior to corn production across the upper Midwest. Wet weather extended harvest into mid-November in many places, and the ground froze before many tillage and fertilizer applications could be completed. This leaves a large percentage of untouched acres going into the already wet spring of 2019.

The Midwest will likely see a bottleneck effect when application windows open and operators are trying to get a hold of anhydrous ammonia application equipment at once. Anhydrous bars and transportation tanks are often supplied by local cooperatives who may only have a dozen applicator bars that service over 100

customers. This is usually not a big issue due to applications split between spring and fall depending on farmers. In addition to the already short application window, corn acres for 2019 are anticipated to increase from 2018 due to slumped soybean markets, further strengthening the demand for anhydrous ammonia.

With the delays in nitrogen application and tillage building up this spring, it is possible there could be some push back on planting dates for corn and soybeans if weather doesn't shift soon. There is no such thing as a "normal" spring, but thankfully rainfall has been limited allowing the snow melt to be absorbed and fields are finally starting to dry. If the Midwest reaches the 3rd week of April and a large percent of field work still needs to be completed prior to planting, there could be a shift in acres to soybeans which require less planting preparation compared to corn.

Every spring the agriculture industry seems to be in a mad dash against time and weather with this spring being no exception. The major things to watch for as we move through April will be the amount of anhydrous ammonia that is able to be applied, daily high temperatures warming the soils, and rainfall preventing farmers from entering fields. Planting in the upper Midwest can go very quickly if the weather allows, and one-to-two weeks in the upper 60's with overnight lows in the high 40's without rain will set the stage for the spring. Until then, farmers will wait for warmer days, spending their time preparing equipment and making last minute tweaks to production plans.