

By Mark Watson

Panhandle No Till Educator

I was fertilizing a field of wheat stubble recently and a half a dozen mallard ducks flew off a pothole in the field that had water in it. I hadn't witnessed ducks in a stubble field for several years.

We also haven't had a full soil moisture profile to plant crops into in several years.

The spring rains have definitely spurred optimism in the farming and ranching community that the worst of the drought may be over. Let's hope Mother Nature doesn't forget about us later in the growing season.

It's no wonder the duck ponds are filling up when I look at the moisture totals over the past several months.

Looking back to last July when last year's wheat stopped using moisture, we have had 12.56 inches of precipitation on our farm. This moisture is 2.66 inches above normal for this time period.

With our best soils holding around six inches of moisture in a four-foot soil profile, we have a full moisture profile to plant our dryland corn crop into.

This also means we have six inches of moisture which we haven't utilized.

Some moisture has been lost to soil evaporation, but there still remains a fairly substantial amount of excess moisture.

In the future, I would like to find a way to use this excess moisture to improve the soil and produce nitrogen for the following crop.

This is my reason for broadcasting red clover into the growing wheat crop this year in some test strips.

If I can get the red clover to establish in the growing wheat, I'm hoping it will continue to grow after the wheat is harvested and produce nitrogen for the following corn crop.

This red clover will also add diversity to the soil microorganisms that wouldn't be there with a mono culture of winter wheat.

Since our corn crop stopped using moisture last October, we have received 6.18 inches of moisture. This translates into a full soil profile for our peas and edible beans which follow the corn crop.

I like our chances of producing good crops of peas and beans this year. On a side note, we planted our peas the last week of March and they finally began emerging around the 20th of April.

They were slow to emerge this year with the cool and wet April. We also found isolated spots in a field of peas where cutworm damage was evident.

For the calendar year of 2009 we have a total of 4.77 inches of precipitation at the end of April. The bulk of this moisture fell in April with 3.53 inches.

As of the end of April we are 1.93 inches above normal. We have had an additional .53 inches so far in May, before last weekend's rain.

After so many years of severe drought, it is a blessing to see the rains return.

The moisture brings with it a sense of optimism that the crops we produce this year have a good chance of being bountiful.

Good luck to you as you plant your crops this spring and let's hope the moisture continues during the growing season.