Manage Unplanted Fields for Success in 2020

The delayed planting season has resulted in many unplanted fields across the state. Producers now must manage these acres to prevent weeds from producing seed that will create problems for years to come. At the same time, growers should be mindful that open fields are vulnerable to erosion that can negatively impact long-term soil quality. Management steps can be taken this summer to maximize production on unplanted acres for 2020.

Weed control on unplanted fields is essential to prevent weeds from setting seed and creating greater weed control challenges in the future. As weeds continue to grow in size, their control becomes increasingly difficult. Herbicide-resistant weeds such as horseweed (marestail) and waterhemp also pose management challenges. Herbicides, mowing, or tillage are all viable control options, but multiple treatments may be necessary through the season to achieve satisfactory weed control.

If using herbicides to control weeds, labels should be consulted as many corn and soybean herbicides are not labeled for fallow field use. Crop rotation restrictions should also be in mind when selecting a herbicide plan. Crops such as wheat, dry beans, and sugarbeets, as well as cover crop species, require special consideration. Dicamba and 2,4-D are popular options for fallow field weed control, but can be subject to off-target movement by drift or volatility, especially in high temperature conditions.

Tillage can be effective to eliminate weeds, though large weeds may survive. Tools that move more soil such as disks or field cultivators will be more effective than vertical tillage implements. Tillage passes are also likely to stimulate the germination of weed seeds, so additional passes are likely to be necessary. Mowing large weeds can improve the control from herbicides and tillage, but is unlikely to fully control weeds alone.

Cover crops should be considered by growers, especially if fields are tilled, in order to minimize erosion, sequester mobile nutrients and improve crop yield potential for 2020. Preventing soil erosion not just from summer storm events, but also wind, is important to maintain soil quality. Good soil structure can improve water infiltration and water holding capacity, important attributes in offsetting the impacts of future wet planting conditions. Cover crops will reduce the potential for erosion, while scavenging nutrients in the soil. Planting a legume cover crop allows for the opportunity to build N levels for the next crop. When paired with an overwintering grass cover that can hold and retain N, fertilizer needs next year can be significantly reduced.

While the 2019 planting season is one most producers have no desire to repeat, thoughtful management through the rest of the season to limit further issues and better position fields for success in 2020.