

Learning about small grains

BY NICK OHDE

WITH corn prices low, many farmers are considering adding small grains to their crop rotation. On Jan. 21-22, Iowa farmers gathered in Ames to learn about the crops from industry professionals, researchers and fellow farmers at the “Growing Good Small Grains” course before Practical Farmers of Iowa’s annual conference.

Most Iowa farmers spend plenty of time thinking about plant populations, plant protection products and fertilizer requirements for corn and soybeans. They know each of these issues is crucial for good yields and better profits, but the same goes for small grains. Speakers focused on each of these concerns throughout the two-day course. More information is at practicalfarmers.org/small-grains.

David Weisberger studies oat production at Iowa State University. He shared survey results from Iowa small grains producers who identified areas where

production knowledge is lacking. “The most important thing we’re losing over time is knowledge infrastructure,” he said. “Practical things like how to clean small grains, what sieves to use; things like that.”

Buyers looking to Iowa

Bruce Roskens of Grain Millers said his company is sourcing more oats from Iowa. “We’ve bought more oats from Iowa in the last year than we did in the previous five,” he said, adding grain quality is important. “When you truly understand your crop’s role as a food ingredient and the process to convert that grain into food, you begin to fully appreciate the specifications and steps necessary to make quality,” he said.

Mac Ehrhardt of Albert Lea Seedhouse said small grains, especially barley, can be a good source of farm-grown feed if precautions are taken. “Small grains can have levels of vomitoxins high enough to sicken or kill animals, so the feed always needs to be tested,” he noted.

Fred Kolb from the University of Illinois

discussed wheat varieties and fusarium head blight, also known as scab, which causes DON (vomitoxin) in grain. He says FHB resistance is the No. 1 priority to look for in a wheat variety.

Joel Ransom of North Dakota State University studies small grains agronomy. “Planting wheat or barley after soybeans instead of corn in your rotation reduces the likelihood of FHB,” he said, because corn harbors the spores that cause FHB.

Small grains are a crucial part of Jefferson farmer Al Frederick’s operation. “As long as you can use the whole crop, they’re a good crop. Small grains provide straw for cattle bedding, and we can use the grain however we want. They are fickle crops in this part of the world, require an extra set of skills and patience, but they do us a lot of good,” he said.

Benefits of longer rotation

Darrin Fehr grows organic oats near Mallard to sell to Grain Millers. He said the harvest method makes a big impact on

yield and test weight. He’s gone to direct-cutting oats instead of swathing, gaining some yield at the cost of losing a little test weight. “I’m out there collecting samples from the first oats I harvest, weighing and adjusting my fan speed accordingly,” he said. Turning up fan speed can increase test weight by blowing out light oats, and increase grain quality by eliminating insects.

Matt Liebman of ISU gave results of Marsden Farm research that studied the economic and environmental effects of crop rotation. The research shows that three- and four-year rotations improve soil health, water quality and corn yields, all while reducing input costs. “Managing your production costs can be an effective way to improve profitability,” he said, adding extended rotations aren’t new and his research was spawned from the farm system of Dick Thompson, founder of PFI.

“The basic agronomy is something farmers have been well acquainted with for a long time,” noted Liebman.

Ohde writes for PFI in Ames.



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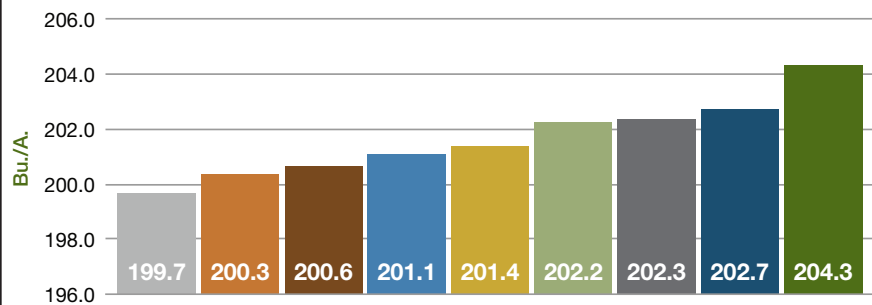
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