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# Arkansas pumps up corn, grain sorghum and winter wheat production

By John Lovett

U of A System Division of Agriculture

## Fast facts

* Arkansas boasts banner year for corn production
* Grain sorghum acres expand by 650 percent with growing use for ethanol
* Winter wheat acres expected to increase with favorable market prices

(778 words)

FAYETTEVILLE, Ark. — Despite severe flooding in southeast Arkansas this year, the state’s farmers produced a banner year of corn with a state average of 183 bushels per acre.

Prompted by attractive market prices, Arkansas farmers also increased grain sorghum production and are on course to increase winter wheat acreage. Grain sorghum production rose to 90,000 acres, which was a marked increase from the 12,000 acres planted in 2020.

## Corn

Although down 1 bushel per acre from 2020, the 183 bushels per acre Arkansas average in 2021 was higher than this year’s U.S. record high average corn yield of 177 bushels per acre. The state average record corn yield was 187 bushels per acre in 2014.

Arkansas planted 850,000 acres of corn, a 37 percent increase over 2020 and the second highest number of acres of corn planted since 1954.

“There are several reasons for the increase in acreage, but a relatively good planting window in March and April and prospects for a good grain price were the driving factors,” said Jason Kelley, University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture professor and wheat and feed grains extension agronomist.

Nearly all farms in the southern half of Arkansas were impacted to some degree by the early June storms and flooding, Kelley said. Flooding, wind damage and nitrogen loss from saturated soils all contributed to loss in yield.

“If it had not been for the early June storms and flood, the state was on track for a record yield,” Kelley said. “But 183 bushels per acre is still a great yield. A good harvest window with no direct hit from tropical storms really helped harvest progress along without issues.”

The buzzkill in all the success can be spelled with three letters: N-P-K; also known as nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium.

“Currently, fertilizer prices and input costs have corn and other crop farmers struggling to pencil out plans for 2022,” Kelley said. “Fertilizer prices now are currently double or more what they were in 2021.”

Increasing fuel costs, labor shortages and limited availability of other inputs such as herbicides and fungicides are issues that Arkansas farmers face going into 2022.

A bright spot, for corn growers at least, is that tar spot has not been identified in Arkansas, Kelley said. The disease caused by the fungus *Phyllachora maydis* was first detected in northern Indiana and Illinois in 2015, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s [Agricultural Research Service](U.S.%20Department%20of%20Agriculture’s).

Tar spot can reduce grain yields by 20 to 60 bushels an acre and has been identified in corn-growing areas of Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Florida, and southwestern Ontario, Canada, the USDA noted. Kelley said tar spot has also been spotted in Georgia, Illinois and Kentucky.

## Grain sorghum

The 650 percent increase in grain sorghum acres were planted primarily in the counties surrounding Helena and West Memphis, Kelley noted. The grain is primarily used in animal feed and by a growing number of ethanol plants, but grain sorghum is gaining popularity in the U.S. because of its gluten-free property and because it is celiac safe, according to National Sorghum Producers.

China has been the largest buyer of American-produced grain sorghum over the last few years and have helped provide price support for the crop, Kelley added.

“Summer rains were nearly ideal, and yields were good to excellent for most sorghum farmers,” Kelley said of the Arkansas grain sorghum crop.

Sugarcane aphid is still a concern for grain sorghum in Arkansas, but Kelley said producers have learned how to manage the pest through close scouting and planting sugarcane aphid tolerant hybrids.

## Winter wheat

With prices near at 10-year high, Arkansas growers likely increased the number of acres planted, Kelley said. There were about 210,000 acres of winter wheat planted in the state last year. The USDA’s National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) agricultural wheat planting report is expected to be released in January.

“Overall, we have had a good fall for planting wheat and the warm weather in December has allowed the crop to obtain good growth this fall,” Kelley said.

By early December, wheat was trading at just over $8 a bushel following a steady increase this fall. The season-average farm price for wheat rose 20 cents per bushel to $6.90 in the fall based on strong prices reported in the Oct. 29 NASS Agricultural Prices report. The September 2021 all-wheat price was estimated at $7.55, which was up from $7.13 in August 2021 and about 60 percent above the $4.73 in September 2020, according to the USDA’s Economic Research Service.

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