

Producer Profile

Kent & Mel Erickson – Irma, Alberta

Kent Erickson and his father Mel farm south of Irma, Alberta in the transition area from the brown to the dark brown soil zone.

“Our winter wheat yield usually matches or exceeds our yield on hard red spring wheat,” says Kent. “There are challenges in growing winter wheat, but the benefits make it well worth the effort on our farm.”

Stewards of the land, the Erickson family have grown winter wheat in a seven to eight year crop rotation on their farm since Mel adopted a direct seeding system in 1992.

“I was interested in a lot of different crops,” said Mel. “We were making huge changes with moving the farm to zero-till. We were expanding our acreage and we needed to find a way to spread out the work-load over the summer. I did a lot of research on how to make a direct seeding system successful and crop rotation was always the key.”

“Larry Koturbash was working with Ducks Unlimited Canada at the time and he encouraged me to grow winter wheat. The first year I seeded 600 acres and had good luck with it, so I just kept on growing it.”

“Winter wheat helped us to extend the harvest window and we save on custom combining charges,” said Mel. “When I first started growing winter wheat I was experimenting with a lot of different things. Doing my own combining gave me the opportunity to discover more about what was going on in my fields, to understand the results and to quickly adapt what I had learned.”

Over the years, the Erickson’s crop rotation has evolved to include the following eight crops in sequence: early maturing Round-Up Ready canola, winter wheat, peas, Hard Red Spring wheat, Liberty Link canola, barley, flax and oats.

“Winter wheat has a good fit in our rotation,” said Mel. “We seed it between an early maturing Round-up Ready canola and field peas. The competitive nature of winter wheat gives us a clean field where we can seed our field peas into the following year. The canola is off in time to seed the winter wheat. We clean up the weeds with two in-crop applications of glyphosate in the canola. When we harvest, we leave as much canola stubble standing as we can to trap snow and to help protect the winter wheat seedlings.”

“The biggest challenge with growing winter wheat is getting the seed in the ground,” says Kent. “A later harvest of canola or September rains like we had last year can really make it tough to get the winter wheat seeded on time.”

“The optimum seeding date on our farm for winter wheat is between the 7 and the 10th of September,” says Mel. “If we seed before September 1, we get too much volunteer canola and end up having to spray it out at the end of September. If the plants develop too much in the fall, poorer re-growth in the spring and lower yields result. Every week later than the 7th of September, we lose 10 bushels/acre of yield.”

“Still, the only reason we wouldn’t seed our winter wheat is if we can’t get it in by the end of September,” says Kent. “This year, we were delayed until September 28. That is very late. Normally, we want our plants to develop to the 2-4 leaf stage in the fall. Last year, a lot of our winter wheat had only one leaf. We still expect it to survive the winter.”



BENEFITS OF GROWING WINTER WHEAT:

EQUIPMENT & LABOUR EFFICIENCIES

By using seed drills, combines and labour outside of their traditional busy times, there is an opportunity for lower demands on equipment and operators.

DIRECT SEEDING

Leaving your stubble helps save your soil from wind and water erosion.

MOISTURE UTILIZATION

What better way to take advantage of snow-melt moisture than to have your crop already in the ground. Winter cereals begin growing very early in the spring and can use the early spring snow-melt moisture.

EARLIER CASH FLOWS

Winter cereals are harvested earlier than other spring cereals and can therefore be marketed earlier, creating some much needed cash flow on the farm in early harvest.

Mel and Kent have never lost a winter wheat crop. "At the beginning of May, we often see green and bare patches in our winter wheat," says Kent. "But by June 1st, they usually all fill in."

Introducing winter wheat into the rotation helps with the spring rush. "We have such a small window for seeding in the spring," says Kent. "It is often too wet or too cold to get on the land before May. When you seed 4000 acres, having 500 acres done in the fall makes a real difference."

Mel has grown many different varieties of winter wheat and appreciates the improvements made to the newer varieties. "We grow Osprey now because it is very competitive," he says. "Bellatrix has better quality if you want to sell it to the Wheat Board but Osprey develops more tillers and gives us the best chance to avoid a wild oat spray."

Winter wheat provides the Ericksons with many opportunities to alter their weed control practices from what they do in a regular spring-seeded cereal.

"The real economic advantage of winter wheat is that one third of the time, we don't have to spray for wild oats," says Kent. "We spray our winter wheat in late May with Attain and mix it with Horizon if we need to control wild oats."

"We are able to get a good kill on our broadleaf weeds," says Mel. "We are spraying in the middle of May instead of in June which allows us to kill a wide spectrum of weeds at an earlier stage."

"Winter wheat must be seeded shallow for success," says Mel. "This is a tough mind set when we're used to growing spring-seeded crops which are completely different. I don't worry about how much moisture I have for winter wheat. Even if it is bone dry, I will seed shallow and count on a little shower to get the crop started. It doesn't take much moisture for winter wheat to germinate. The downside of this is two weeks of wet weather will germinate a standing crop of winter wheat in the field."

"Most years this quick germination isn't a problem at harvest," says Kent. "We generally have nice dry weather in August." The quick germination is more of an advantage at seeding, especially in dry conditions.

The Ericksons aim for a plant population of 25 plants/square foot. "There can be so much variability in seed lots that it's smart to use your thousand kernel weight and measured germination to calculate your seeding rate," says Kent.

Fertility is an important consideration and the Ericksons soil test and fertilize with N, P and K. "The phosphate is good for early growth and helps with winter hardiness," explains Kent. "We put our nitrogen in a side band. We've tried dribble-banding an extra application of nitrogen in the spring when we've had excellent growing conditions but we've gone away from that now because we're just too busy."

Kent admits that marketing winter wheat can be a challenge, but earlier harvest can also create opportunity. "In our area, our only two options are through the Canadian Wheat Board (CWB) or our local feed mill," he says. "This year, we had all milling quality winter wheat, but we sold it to the feed mill in town because they had a better price."

"Winter wheat is a small acreage crop that hasn't had as much attention as traditional spring-seeded grains from the CWB," Kent explains. "It has to be segregated to preserve its identity and to sell it into the higher value milling markets. With a small volume of grain, this is a hassle at the elevator. The CWB contracting program now ensures segregation which provides a quality product to buyers."

"Winter wheat sold through the CWB has been separated into quality grades 1 or 2 for human use or feed," Kent explains. "This limited variability does not give farmers a lot of options. Samples that are downgraded to feed bring a much lower price. And, the 11.5% protein requirement previously set by the CWB is not regularly attainable by Alberta farmers."

Kent is a director for the Alberta Winter Wheat Producers Commission (AWWPC). "The AWWPC is working with the CWB to get more flexibility in the grading of winter wheat, most recently reducing the protein requirement to 11.0%, increasing market options," he says.

"If winter wheat acres continue to increase and markets are developed," says Mel. "I can see a bright future for winter wheat in Alberta."

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