

Producer Profile

Kent Meers - Acadia Valley, Alberta

Kent Meers was looking for a new crop to help improve the profitability and environmental sustainability of his crop rotation. "On our farm, growing a crop efficiently means growing it at the right time of year," says Kent. "Winter wheat is able to take advantage of early spring moisture which allows us to extend our rotations and to be more profitable."

Kent and his two brothers Gary and Dwight farm 10,000 dryland acres in a mixed farming operation at Acadia Valley, Alberta. As much as half their cropland every year remains in chemfallow while the rest is seeded to annual cereals and oilseeds.

"The water use pattern of winter wheat fits well with the conditions on our farm," says Kent. "When we get into July we get a lot of heat and not much rain. Winter wheat is established in the fall and early ground cover in the spring helps preserve the moisture we do have and makes use of it for growth. We get a better stand with winter wheat than with other spring cereals and catch more snow for the following year. In this area, where moisture is in short supply, adding winter wheat to our crop rotation looks like a better farming practice."

In Acadia Valley, moisture is always a limiting factor. Kent hopes that growing winter wheat will help him to extend his crop rotation and reduce the amount of chem-fallow on their farm. "This year, we're trying camelina, an oilseed used in the biodiesel industry with some potential for food uses," he says. "This early crop might provide us with stubble to seed our winter wheat crop into. We are still considering whether or not we will have enough moisture to seed into our winter wheat stubble. Winter wheat has a thick stand and we straight cut so our standing stubble is higher. This should help us to catch more snow and hopefully this will be enough to establish a spring crop on winter wheat stubble."

Kent sees several other benefits to growing winter wheat. "We found that winter wheat yields exceeded our spring wheat and durum by 25%. The early maturity of winter wheat spreads out the harvest pressure. We also have a real sawfly problem in our cereals and often we are forced to swath to keep our crop from going down. Sawfly damage is greatly reduced in winter wheat which allows us to straight cut and improve our harvest efficiency. This helps increase our yield."

"We've grown winter wheat for two years now," says Kent. "Before we got started, we talked with Melissa Stanford at Ducks Unlimited Canada and an experienced grower at a local seminar that helped to prepare us to grow winter wheat. I think being prepared for seeding and getting it done on time is the main thing. The first year we grew winter wheat, the harvest was later so we had our winter wheat seeded into chemfallow before we started harvesting. We had everything ready for seeding and were aiming to seed before the 15th of September, which is optimum for our area. We chose a field of mustard chemfallow with good standing stubble to catch snow. We actually had a little shower and went in and seeded on September 18th. We placed 80 lbs of 34-17-0-0 with the seed and top dressed another 80 lbs of 46-0-0 in the spring."



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.

The Meers are careful to seed shallow for better emergence: "We seed at a depth of 1 inch or less," says Kent. "That is what was recommended to us by other winter wheat growers. The last two years we've had some moisture in the fall at seeding time but we don't always. It will be interesting to see how this crop does when we have a dry year. Having seen this crop grow, we wouldn't hesitate to seed winter wheat even if it is dry. We know that winter wheat does not require much moisture to germinate."

Like many new growers, the Meers had concerns about winter survival. "I am sure the newer varieties have much better winter survival," says Kent. "I remember my Dad saying how poor winter wheat survival was when he grew it years ago."

"We seeded almost 2 bushels/acre to hit our target of 22 plants/square foot. It was a little dry when the crop was seeded so it took longer to germinate than we had hoped but by the time it froze, we were at the 2-3 leaf stage and had pretty good growth. We would have liked to see more development before winter but we had decent snow cover most of the winter and the survival was excellent. We had early emergence, early ground cover in the spring and a healthy crop. This helped the winter wheat get ahead of the wild oats and out-compete it. The only herbicide we applied in-crop was 2, 4-D to clean up the volunteer mustard. The spring cereals we grow on our farm are sprayed for broadleaf weeds and patch sprayed for wild oats. We spend around \$10-12/acre on spray in our spring cereals compared with the \$3-\$4 we spend on herbicide for our winter wheat."

The Meers have a John Deere 1850 No-Till drill they've been modifying to reduce the amount of disturbance at seeding time. "We grow a lot of mustard and that's where we've grown our winter wheat," Kent explains. "Mustard stubble gets knocked down easily during the seeding operation so it is important to choose your seeding equipment carefully. The first year we grew winter wheat, we built our own double disc



openers and packers on one third of the drill. They worked really well and kept more stubble standing so this winter, we converted the rest of the drill. We are really looking forward to seeding with it this year."

"I am not concerned about marketing winter wheat," says Kent. "The first year we grew the variety Radiant. We tried to get some of it into the CWB Select program and our grain was accepted as number one. We didn't have 11.5% protein which would have earned us a \$10/tonne premium last year. The rest of our winter wheat was sold into the feed market for a good return."

Kent and a few of his neighbours have had some success with winter wheat. "Growing winter wheat is still all new to us," says Kent. "But what we've experienced makes me think winter wheat is going to be a good fit on our farm for a long time."

▶ **For more information** please contact one of our winter wheat specialists at Ducks Unlimited Canada:

Edmonton: Dale Soetaert
Phone: (780) 930-1250
Cell: (780) 235-5348
Email: d_soetaert@ducks.ca

Lethbridge: Melissa Stanford
Phone: (403) 327-1363
Cell: (403) 795-5017
Email: m_stanford@ducks.ca

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