

Farmer faces tough planting season with optimism



Photos and
Story by
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ABOVE: DON SLATER talks with his son Gary as he takes a break to fill the tanks on his tractor with fertilizer, herbicide and insecticide. Don has lived in the same area since he was a child and farmed his entire life. Even though he retired 10 years ago, Don Slater still gets up every morning to see how he can help Gary Slater around the farm.



ABOVE: GARY SLATER holds the Bt corn seeds that will be planted on the family's 1,400-acre farm.

dry spell

CLAY CENTER — Gary Slater's day begins at around 5:30 a.m. Tuesday. It is still dark out, and he is eating his breakfast alone at his kitchen table.

His wife, Cathy, is still asleep.

He eats cereal with slices of banana and a glass of orange juice while watching "Ag Day," a show geared toward farmers. It includes commodity prices and information on new technologies for farmers.

But more important now for Slater is the weather forecast. Nebraska is considered to be in severe drought conditions, and farmers during this year's planting season are facing low prices for their product.

Slater is still storing some of last year's corn in his storage bins hoping prices will rise, but he is taking a risk because prices could continue to drop.

"There's more to farming than just raising a crop," Slater said. "It's marketing, too."

Low prices may fuel demand on the farm market, but if the rain doesn't come, there may not be a supply to fill that demand.

Tuesday is his first day of planting. The skies are cloudy and overcast, and Slater is expecting it to rain.

But rain never comes while Slater runs his 12-row John Deere planter over his first 120 acres, which he considers good for his first day of planting.

The Slater family farms about 1,400 acres in this area. Their farm is in south central Nebraska near Clay Center in Clay County, about 100 miles from Lincoln.

Only about half their acres are irrigated, leaving the rest as dry-land farm, susceptible to this year's expected dry conditions.

Cause for concern

Slater has been farming this land for 20 years, since he completed an associate's degree at Norfolk Community College. The worst drought conditions he's ever seen were in 1988.

"It didn't start out this dry then," Slater said. "We saw 100-degree days in May, which is a little unusual. Everything that wasn't irrigated burned."

"I've seen it so rainy here that you take advantage of every hour because you don't know when you'll get back in the field again. I'm out here to get the seeds in the ground, but we need the rain."

Gary Slater's father, Don Slater, was 10 years old in 1934, the first year he can remember his family not being able to grow anything on the land because of the Dust Bowl conditions.

Don Slater said his family couldn't grow anything until five years later, in 1939.

"You couldn't see because the dirt blew so much," Don Slater said. "After a dust storm, the ground was red from the dirt from Oklahoma."

"Then the grasshoppers came and made the sky look cloudy."

Gary Slater's brother Glen Slater has the day off from work, so he comes to help on the first day of planting.

The two run their tractors, Gary Slater planting and Glen Slater running a stalk chopper, until after 5 p.m. That's when Gary Slater eats some lunch in the field from his pickup truck out of a cooler that his wife, Cathy Slater, prepared for him that afternoon.

Planting continues through the day. Gary Slater puts the equipment away and doesn't return home for dinner until after 10 p.m.

At this rate, 12 hours or more a day of planting, Gary Slater expects he'll be done with planting by May 1 if he doesn't have any delays.

"Three things I fight every year are the weather, the government and machinery breakdowns," he said. "Machinery, irrigation and harvesting breakdowns are real setbacks."

There were no breakdowns the first day, but Gary Slater expects some rain because of the cloudy conditions, and there has been a forecast of severe weather.

Starting the day

Slater's second day begins at 5:19 a.m. with cereal for breakfast and a glass of orange juice. He drives to the farm at his father's to fuel the tractors and fill the seed bins on the planter. He is in the field by 8:30 a.m.

Even though Don Slater, 75, said he has been retired for 10 years, he comes out to see what Gary Slater wants him to do for the farm today.

Gary Slater gets the planter into the field and is greeted by a flock of seagulls, which he says is usually a sign of rain.

But Wednesday is filled by sunny blue skies and 1,280 acres left to plant.

Fear for the future

By Sunday evening, Gary Slater's farm has still not seen a drop of rain.

He says he will have to turn the irrigation on soon if the dry conditions continue.

His wife says he keeps the right attitude about his work.

"He thinks there's nothing you can do about it, and so he tries to stay positive," Cathy Slater said.

She says she tries not to think about it, but before her husband left for work that morning, he didn't look happy.

"He was thinking he could take Easter off if it rained," Cathy Slater said.

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Nebraska farmer