

News Column
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FIRST HOLLOW STEM

They say experience is the best teacher. While I agree with that thought, I might take it a step further and suggest that a bad experience is an even better teacher.

I'm not suggesting that I need a major trauma in order to learn a lesson, but I do think the lessons most ingrained in my mind are tied to a mistake – usually a costly mistake – that I made either out of ignorance or negligence.

Negligence is probably the correct term to describe how I learned about wheat jointing. Dad knew what he should do – and I even remember him talking about needing to get his cows off his wheat because it might be jointing – but he still grazed at least a week too long one spring.

I think it was the early 1970s, but the exact year is hard to pinpoint. My recollection though is that wheat at that time, and in that part of the state, usually jointed around mid-April. Dad grazed at least to the third week of April, and maybe until May 1.

Grazing so long looked like a major mistake, but Dad told himself that feed for his cows was what he really needed and it was OK if he hurt his wheat yield. We talked about how much yield he had lost by grazing too long, and he eventually started kicking himself for not getting the cows moved off the wheat.

Dad spent three or four weeks beating himself up for his poor management....then we had a late spring freeze that damaged everybody else's wheat. At harvest time, our wheat produced a respectable yield while most of our neighbors had next to nothing.

Sometimes luck trumps good management.

I don't advise relying on luck over good management and I suggest that cattlemen scout wheat fields regularly so they can remove cattle before the wheat joints. Yield loss from grazing past jointing is estimated to be one to five percent per day. While that might not sound like much, five percent of a 40 bushel per acre yield is two bushels.

In recent years agronomists have been advising producers to remove cattle from wheat at First Hollow Stem (FHS) instead of waiting until jointing. It is a pretty fine distinction between the two, but their reasoning is that you can dissect a plant and see the hollow stem and tiny developing head before you can feel the joint.

In practice, I have probably been looking for FHS for years without knowing that's what it was called. If I run wheat stems between my fingers and feel the node, I know for sure it is jointed and I will dissect above the node to find the developing head. When I can't feel the node, I still cut plants open to try to find a head.

The reason any of this matters is because, once that tiny head has emerged above the ground, you don't want to chew it off and hurt the yield. You won't see the head though unless you cut some plants open. The head is near the surface of the ground, still wrapped in the stem and still weeks from emerging at the top of the plant.

All you need is pocket knife and good eyesight. Pull up a few plants from an ungrazed area, cut the stems in half lengthwise near the ground, and look for a hollow stem and a very small head. If there is no hollow stem, then the head is still below ground.

Finding a tiny wheat head the first time might be a challenge, but after you've done it a few times it will be obvious what you are looking for. The head might be the size of the lead protruding from a sharp pencil, maybe a bit smaller, and it will a light yellowish green color.

If you dissect plants and find hollow stems about one half inch long, it is time to move cattle off the field. If the hollow stem is much longer than one half inch, then you can probably find the hardened joint by feel and you are just dissecting to prove to yourself that what you feel is real.

If you can feel the joint, you're probably a few days late and you have grazed too long. The result of grazing too long will be fewer heads per acre, and smaller, lighter heads than expected.

I saw some wheat last week that wasn't jointed, and hadn't yet reached First Hollow Stem, but my guess is that other fields are further along and have been jointed for a week. Things move pretty fast this time of year. If you haven't started dissecting wheat plants yet, it is time to start.

If you have questions, you can reach me at the Riley County Extension Office at 785/537-6350. Or, you can send e-mail to gmcclure@ksu.edu.

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