MONTANA
Farmer-Stockman

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What to Do With 650,000 Acres of Wheat Land?

By JERRY LESTER

THE NEW WHEAT acreage allotment program might well be considered an "opportunity" for many of Montana's dryland wheat farmers, according to Ralph Williams, superintendent of the Central Montana branch experiment station at Moccasin. "It is an opportunity," he declares, "to increase production efficiency and thus reduce overhead through use of better methods and approved varieties of seed. It is an opportunity to get many submarginal acres of wheat land back into grass, at least in the form of grassed waterways, buffer strips and other conservation applications."

Another INCOME Builder

Williams' point is that by using better farming practices and decreasing the farm overhead, many farmers would suffer little from a 15 to 20 percent decrease in their wheat acreage now. Besides this, building up the land and conserving it would be invaluable to the farmers' sons, the state and the nation.

Not All Work, No Pay

And the good part about all this talk about a "conservation opportunity" is that it doesn't mean all work and no real pay. Take such an established practice as summerfallow, for example. It is followed by a good many farmers now on only one-third or less of their land in spite of the fact that years of experience have shown more than double production on summerfallowed land as compared to continuous cropping.

And to go a step farther—winter wheat seeded on crested wheatgrass land produced 38 bushels to the acre at Moccasin this year as compared with only 26 bushels on regular summerfallow. Figures for 1948, when moisture conditions were more favorable, were even more striking—44 bushels to the acre on land formerly in crested wheatgrass and 28½ bushels on summerfallow.

Williams estimates that if the average wheat farmer puts in grass only where it was needed for field waterways to control water erosion or in buffer strips to control wind erosion, this alone would amount to about half of the reduction in wheat acreage now being asked.

Demand for Grass Seed

Williams also pointed out that never in the last 40 years has there been such a demand for grass seed. So why not put in crested wheatgrass and harvest a seed crop? This seed would probably be needed in the locality, but if not, the entire northwest faces this grass seed shortage at the present time.

Also this grass seed production doesn't have to be on a big scale. If every wheat farmer harvested only about 1,000 pounds of seed there would be plenty in the state, and the danger of a drouth area hitting one or two large seed producers would be lessened, Williams points out.

Here then, is an opportunity to use grass in controlling soil blowing and water erosion and at the same time have a good cash crop. And when this land is put back into wheat, you can expect a 10 to 15-bushel increase in yield, according to the experiment station findings mentioned before. So you can't lose by planting at least some of those extra acres to grass.

$45 to $60 an Acre

But how about profits from this grass seed operation? Seed production on dryland in a good year will run from 300 to 500 pounds to the acre. Williams admits that it might drop lower, however, so let's take 90 pounds to the acre at the current price of 50 cents a pound. This would gross the operator $45 an acre. Remember, too that all this seed (Please turn to page 34)

MONTANA'S WHEAT acreage allotment for 1950, as set by Secretary of Agriculture Charles F. Brannan, was 4,893,000 acres, a cut of 1,110,194 acres or 23.5 percent from the record of 1949 planting of 5,378,000 acres.

But as this issue goes to press President Truman has signed a bill which is expected to INCREASE THE MONTANA ALLOTMENT by approximately 330,000 acres. This would bring the allotted acreage for 1950 to 4,615,806 acres, still somewhat above the 1942-1947 five-year average of 4,456,000 planted acres. The average reduction for the state would be approximately 14 percent instead of 23.5 percent.

For a summary of details of the new allotment plan as are available, turn to page 39.