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Research and Extension

## Extension Agronomy

# eUpdate

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These e-Updates are a regular weekly item from K-State Extension Agronomy and Kathy Gehl, Agronomy e-Update Editor. All of the Research and Extension faculty in Agronomy will be involved as sources from time to time. If you have any questions or suggestions for topics you'd like to have us address in this weekly update, contact Kathy Gehl, 785-532-3354 [kgehl@ksu.edu](mailto:kgehl@ksu.edu), or Curtis Thompson, Extension Agronomy State Leader and Weed Management Specialist 785-532-3444 [cthompso@ksu.edu](mailto:cthompso@ksu.edu).

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**1. Emergency measures to control wind erosion..... 3**

## 1. Emergency measures to control wind erosion

Cropland can be quite susceptible to wind erosion under some conditions. Cooler-than-normal temperatures and drought conditions may limit vegetative growth and cover. Burning or removing crop residues for forage creates a particularly serious hazard. Winter wheat and other fall-planted crop fields also may be susceptible during periods of low cover in the winter and early spring. This is particularly true after a drought year. Marginally productive cropland may not produce sufficient residue to protect against wind erosion. In addition, overgrazed or poorly vegetated rangeland may also be subject to wind erosion. Recent wind conditions have been conducive to erosion (Figure 1), given the peak wind gusts that have been recorded in Kansas over the last few days (Figure 2).



**Figure 1. Blowing soil across Kansas Highway 27 in Sherman County on April 17, 2018. Photo taken by Jeanne Falk Jones, K-State Research and Extension.**



producing resistant clods and surface ridges (Figures 3 and 4). A rough surface reduces wind speed. The larger clods and ridges resist movement and provide traps to catch the moving soil particles.

Chisels with single or only a few tool ranks are frequently used to roughen the soil surface. The combination of chisel point size, speed, and depth that produces the roughest surface with the most firm, resistant clods should be used for emergency tillage.

Research has shown that a narrow chisel (2 inches wide) on 24- to 54-inch spacing, operated 3 to 6 inches deep will usually bring enough resistant clods to the surface to control erosion on fine-textured (clay-based) soils. A medium shovel (4 inches wide) can be effective for medium-textured soils (loamy soils). Spacings should typically be narrower where there is no cover and wider in areas of partial cover, such as a growing crop or plant residue.

If the erosion conditions recur or persist, a second, deeper chiseling should split the first spacing. Tillage passes should be made perpendicular to the direction of the prevailing wind causing the erosion.



**Figure 3. Emergency tillage across 50 percent of the field. Photo courtesy of USDA-ARS Engineering and Wind Erosion Unit, Manhattan, Kansas.**



**Figure 4. Widely spaced shanks used for emergency tillage, making clods to roughen the soil surface. Photo courtesy of University of Nebraska.**

If emergency tillage is to be used in growing crops that are covered by crop insurance, producers should check with their crop insurance providers regarding emergency tillage insurance rules. Emergency tillage does not significantly reduce wheat yields of an established crop. Studies in southwest Kansas and Manhattan demonstrate that the use of a chisel on 40-inch spacing reduced wheat yields by 5.5 bushels per acre on the emergency tillage area, due to direct injury caused by the tillage action. Since the entire field is rarely tilled when performing emergency tillage, the overall yield reduction for the field will be less than 5.5 bushels per acre. In fact, yields in the untilled portion of the field actually can be increased by the use of emergency tillage since that tillage will reduce the amount of damage to wheat caused by wind erosion. The overall reduction in yield for fields that have received emergency tillage has been as little as 1 bushel per acre in the studies mentioned above.

Performing emergency, clod-forming tillage across the field is effective in reducing wind erosion. The degree of success of emergency tillage is highly dependent on climatic, soil, and cover condition. It is often not necessary to till the entire field, but rather, it is very effective to perform emergency tillage passes across 50% of the field (till a pass, leave a pass, repeat). Narrow chisel spacing (20 to 24 inches) is best for this method.

If 50% of the area has been tilled and wind erosion persists, the omitted strips can be emergency-tilled in a second operation to make result in full-cover tillage. If a second tillage pass is needed, it should be at a greater depth than the first pass. Wide-chisel spacings are used in the full-field coverage method. The space between chisel grooves can be chiseled later should wind erosion persist.

All tillage operations should be perpendicular or across the direction of the prevailing or eroding

wind. For most of Kansas, this means that an east-west direction of tillage is likely best.

The best wind erosion control is created with maximum surface roughness when resistant clods cover a major portion of the surface. Research shows that lower travel speeds of 2 to 3 mph generally produce the largest and most resistant clods. However, speeds of 5 to 7 mph produce the greatest roughness. Because clod resistance is usually reduced at higher speeds, the effect may not be as long-lasting as at lower speeds. Thus, higher speeds are recommended where erosion is already in progress, while lower speeds might be a better choice in anticipation of erosion.

Depth of tillage usually affects clod stability more than travel speed, but optimum depth is highly dependent on soil conditions (such as moisture level) and compaction. Deeper tillage passes can produce more resistant clods than shallow passes.

If the problem is severe and the wheat has already been destroyed or the ground is bare, chisels 4 to 6 inches wide on a 24- to 30-inch spacing will generally provide enough clods to control erosion. Operating depth should be 4 to 6 inches.

### **Controlling wind erosion on sandy soils**

Loose sandy soils require a different tillage approach to effectively control erosion. Clods cannot be formed at the surface that will be sufficiently resistant to erosion on sandy soils. Erosion resistance is achieved through building ridges and furrows in the field to provide adequate protection.

A 14-inch moldboard lister spaced 40 to 50 inches apart (or an 8-inch lister on 20- to 24-inch spacing) is needed to create sufficient surface roughness. The first listing pass should be shallow, not more than about 4 to 5 inches deep. Then, when additional treatment is needed, the depth should become progressively deeper. Alternatively, for the second treatment, the original ridge may be split.

The addition of manure to the ridged surface may also be beneficial in these situations.

### **Tips for effective emergency tillage**

- Watch the weather forecast for periods of high winds, particularly when soils are dry.
- Assess residue and plant cover prior to the wind blowing, and take preventive action with emergency tillage. It is much easier to prevent the problem from starting than to stop erosion after it begins. If you wait, the soil only gets drier and some moisture is needed to form clods.
- Use the combination of tractor speed, tillage depth, and chisel point size that will produce the roughest surface with the most resistant clods. If wind erosion is anticipated, do some test tillage prior to an erosion event to see what tillage tool, depth, and speed will provide adequate clods and surface roughness.
- Always start at the upwind location when the field is blowing. A sufficient area upwind of the eroding spot should be tilled, in addition to the area presently blowing.
- Till in a direction perpendicular to the prevailing wind direction. For row crop areas it may be necessary to compromise direction and follow the row pattern. Maintain as much anchored stubble in the field as possible.

For more information, see K-State Research and Extension publication MF2206, *Emergency Wind Erosion Control*, at: <http://www.ksre.ksu.edu/bookstore/pubs/MF2206.pdf>

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