

# Pros, cons of small grains in Iowa

BY NICK OHDE

**W**ADE Dooley of Glenwood Century Farm is a member of Practical Farmers of Iowa and farms near Albion. Dooley grows small grains, along with row crops, livestock, watermelon and winter squash, among other crops. In this interview he shares his thoughts on producing small grains in Iowa and offers advice for younger farmers considering them.

## Why do you want to grow small grains?

Small grains benefit my operation by spreading my workload for planting and harvest; giving me income in the off-season; cutting my crop expenses, as small grains don't cost as much to grow; opening a wider window to allow better use of cover crops for soil-building; and better use of the land — 10 months with something growing, rather than five months with corn.

## What issues do you run into trying to market small grains?

If I wanted to sell oats, whom do I call? If I want to sell corn, on the other hand, I have three different phone numbers in my phone of people within 10 miles who I can call, and I'd have the corn sold five minutes from now. But with oats, I'd have to call the end user of my product, Grain Millers or General Mills, to get prices. There's nothing in between.

There are feed mills in the area, but their capacity is much smaller. You're not going to pull out 100 acres of oats and expect to be able to get rid of it all in 15 minutes. Everyone has a certain capacity, and many feed mills don't use a lot of small grains unless they're specialized; and then they've already got a contract, because they know their demand, which is generally pretty stable.

## You mainly grow small grains for cover crop seed. What are some questions to consider?

When you buy the grain uncleaned or "bin run," that opens the door to several things. One, you have to control weed seeds. Whoever is growing it, you want to know what his field looks like before he combines it. If there are a lot of weeds, you're buying his weeds. That's bad.

Second, you want to know how much trash is in it. How clean did he get the grain sample in the combine? If you get too many stems and pieces, you're buying a lot of fluff and not a lot of seed,



**DIVERSIFIED FARMING:** Oats grow in a central Iowa field.

## He said it



"Currently, corn and soybeans are low-priced. I want to spread out my income streams to help manage risk."

**Wade Dooley,**  
central Iowa farmer

and you can only run it through so many pieces of equipment. I've gotten dirty seed before that I tried to run through my grain drill, and it plugged continuously. If you're buying or selling dirty seed, know that it needs to be broadcast, not drilled or flown on.

## To increase grain quality and test weight so they meet the standard to sell to General Mills or Grain Millers, what would you have to do?

I'd have to either use resistant oat varieties or fungicides at the right time to prevent vomitoxin. I'd rather rely on cultural practices that would let me avoid needing to use fungicides. For example, I wouldn't follow corn with oats because fusarium, which causes vomitoxin, is shared between the two.

Make sure your soil fertility is up to snuff for oats. Rather than put them on the worst ground I have, I'd treat them like I do

my corn and soybeans: I'd make sure the seed is accurately placed, fertilizer is at the rate it should be, and the soil has been treated the way it should be. Treat small grains like a true cash crop, rather than a "catch" crop.

I would have to have a high-capacity seed cleaner. My seed cleaners have the capacity to do 20 to 40 bushels per hour. At that rate, it would take a whole day to clean a semiloading of oats. I would need something with capacity to do 120 bushels an hour or better. All these things cost money.

## When Iowa produced a lot of oats, how did farmers clean their grain?

You didn't have semis running oats 60 or 70 years ago. You'd bring your oats into the granary and spend all winter cleaning them. My great-uncle did that all his life. Every winter, he would clean all his oats; then he'd clean all his soybeans by running them through a little clipper mill.

Everyone did that, but that was the 1950s and '60s. You were actually farming profitably on 80 acres; 160 acres was a big farm. If you got much bigger, you probably weren't doing oats. Again, you needed to sit there with that fanning mill with a 20- or 40-bushel-an-hour capacity. It was that scale then.

## What has changed?

There's a huge knowledge gap now. My thought process isn't even at a 10-acre scale, let alone 20 acres. And 20 acres

of oats is a lot of oats you have to store somewhere — another problem. Everyone has bins set up for corn and beans. The slots in a corn bin floor are too big for oats. The only bin I have is a multipurpose bin from the early '80s. That's 30-year-old equipment.

## Why do you grow small grains, if it's such a challenge?

The ability to diversify an operation is key. You look at the old boys who made small grains work for 60 years; they didn't grow one crop. In general, they had various enterprises that all flowed one into another. Anyone could have been its own operation, never tied into anything else, but tying enterprises together is how you ride out hard times.

Right now, for example, it's a bad time to be a row crop farmer, but a great time to be a cattleman.

The more diversified your operation, the more able you are to ride through rough trends by subsidizing your operation one place or another. I want to spread out my income streams. It's like an investment strategy with stocks: diversify your portfolio for long term, not immediate success. That's what I'm trying to do.

## Do you have advice for young farmers on persuading bankers to fund alternative crops?

The more information you have, the more power you have with the banker. If you have your stuff together, a lender will realize you know what you're talking about. And if you know what you're talking about, the lender is more willing to accept your numbers. They'll say, "Your numbers are more accurate than mine are, so we'll run with yours."

What's better, though, is if you have multiple sets of numbers — case studies, basically, so they can average the numbers. That's what the bank numbers are: an average of the numbers they have available. They have a massive amount of data on corn and soybeans in central Iowa, for example, so they know what the average should be. They also have allowable parameters, and if you're below a certain number, you're a really high risk.

Small grains aren't grown widely anymore. Banks don't have the averages anymore. If you pull numbers from Kansas and Nebraska, Iowa lenders won't accept those; it's a completely different climate not just in weather, but because the infrastructure is there. The marketing is there. We don't have either in Iowa.

*Ohde writes for PFI at Ames.*