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The Farmer's Challenge: Coping with 'New Normal' Kansas Weather

Gail Fuller

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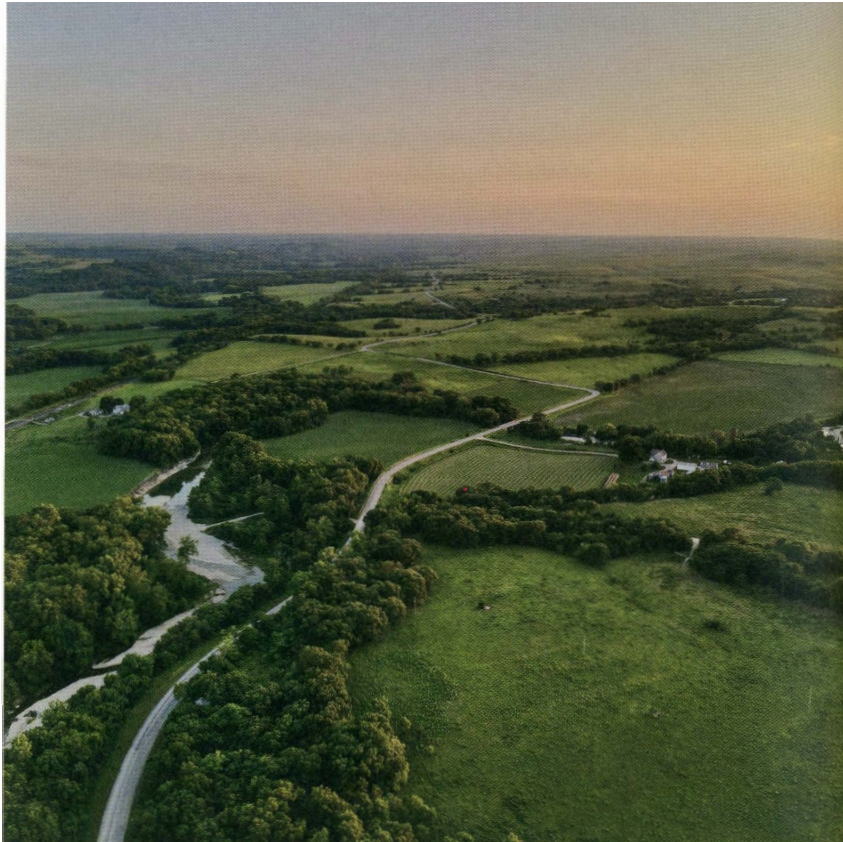
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Old K-10 07/04/21
Christopher Spaw

THE FARMER'S CHALLENGE

COPING WITH 'NEW NORMAL' KANSAS WEATHER

Weather, climate or whatever you want to call it dictates a farmer's livelihood and a consumer's ability to nourish.

Weather in Kansas has also made farming trying, but today we are past trying. We are at the point where growing food crops is becoming difficult. Rainfall is becoming heavier, droughts bigger and weather swings much more extreme. This makes it difficult for row crop and specialty crop farmers to plant and harvest in a timely manner. For me, it has become a significant challenge.

Take 2021, for example. On my Flint Hills farm in Greenwood County, January was very mild, much as December had been. By early February, our fruit trees were trying to bud, and we needed a cold snap to slow their progress.

Lord, did we get one!

A polar vortex in early February saw temps plummet from 50 to below zero, with wind chills of 33 below. A couple of days after the vortex, we were in the 60s. These wild swings in temperature are extremely difficult on plants and animals. Most of our fruit production was lost to the vortex and a late freeze in spring. The year before, in 2020, we lost 100% of production to late freezes for three consecutive weeks.

During 2021's vortex, I spent two weeks making sure animals were out of the wind, fed and watered. In my "spare" time, I hauled wood to keep fires lit and tried (unsuccessfully) to keep water pipes flowing. Winter is supposed to be a season of rest, but during storms like this, I expended a lot of energy putting in 12 to 15 hours a day.

As winter gave way to spring, temperatures warmed, and the farm came to life. Early March saw a very rainy pattern, with over 10 inches of rain falling in a week. Events like this are becoming more and more common. This time, the rainfall was welcome because the last half of 2019 was extremely dry, and our ponds were low to empty. We had not had water run on our farm since late May 2020.

April 2021 saw drier than normal temps, and May was even drier. June was not only dry, but also much warmer than normal.

I struggled to get a garden in with all the other farm work to do. Once planting was complete, the hot, dry spring made watering a challenge and also took its toll on me. As the days grew longer and hotter, and as my body struggled to maintain its youth, it became difficult to keep my strength. A person can easily become depressed in this circumstance. Physical and mental fatigue set in, and you literally have to work every day to make sure you are eating and drinking properly to keep yourself going.

The snow and rain during winter blessed us with great spring grass, and our cows, sheep, pigs and chickens were off to a great start. We calve and lamb in spring, and it's always a joy to watch all the babies frolicking in the green grass under the warm sun. I try to slow down so I can

spend time watching the happenings with the herds and the flocks.

In the case of the cows and sheep, the littles, just like their human counterparts, sometimes tend to wander too far or do something they shouldn't, which forces them to deal with the wrath of mom. And just like kids, there always seems to be a neighborhood game going with plenty of running and bucking.

Baby pigs have similar shenanigans, and they are much more vocal during the good and the bad times (as are their mothers!). Pigs have to be the best, they are so social and so smart. A person could waste all day watching them.

June gave way to July. Contrary to the old normal, but in line with the new normal, temps eased, and a little moisture returned. We were still dry, but not as dry as last year. The grasses seemed to get a small drink on the day they needed it most.

For the most part, the farm lived paycheck to paycheck this past summer. Just as we thought drought was going to win, we would get a small rain and the farm would refresh for a few days, the grass would grow and the wildflowers would bloom.

August was not your typical August, either: Temps were warm but certainly bearable, and much-needed rain fell, allowing the pastures to turn lush, a little unusual in Augusts past. The cows and



Autumn Cornfield
Ian Huebert

sheep suddenly had a hard time keeping up with the grass — a great relief since I had spent the prior 12 months worrying whether we would have enough grass to graze week to week, and whether we would be forced to sell some of the flocks and herd (I call it the flerd).

September returned to hot and dry. We started worrying about winter stockpile

(ample grass to be used for winter forage — we try to feed as little hay as possible in winter). But then October came in like a breath of fresh air. The month was warm, but the rains were plentiful. Our ponds filled, and the grass, now in the reproductive stage, got a much-needed drink heading into winter. As I write this in November 2021, winter stockpile is

abundant, so we will need much less hay to get us through till spring.

I'm sure meteorologists will tell us 2021 was pretty close to average, and from a record keeping perspective they will be right. But from a food growing perspective, just because it's average doesn't mean it's normal. Growing food today is becoming more and more challenging.

At year's end our average temperature and rainfall may be near average, but what has changed is the manner in which we receive the rainfall (coming in buckets or not at all) and the wild temperature swings. Farmers face challenges as they struggle to adapt to this new normal.

ANOTHER FARMING CHALLENGE: DECLINING SOIL QUALITY

When farmers visit, the question to ask after a rainfall event should NOT be, "How much did you get?" Rather, it should be, "How much did you capture?"

As modern farming and ranching practices continue to degrade soil, the infiltration rate and water-holding capacity of the soil decrease, allowing for more runoff. The best way to ensure resilience on our farms and ranches is by focusing on healthy soil, not production, because when soil is healthy, production will follow. In fact, I often say, "Soil is the answer. What was the question?"

Much of the conflict in human history started because of hunger (degraded soil). Healthy soil provides nutrient-dense food that eliminates hunger and depression.

Ten years ago, I was blessed to host seven Iraqi researchers, including the minister of agriculture. A statement he made that day has stuck with me and helps drive me to this day.

"The single biggest problem facing Iraq today is: At the end of the day, there's not enough protein on our plates to keep our brains functioning properly," he said.

I can't think of one single issue facing mankind today that we can't solve with healthy soil.

Let that soak in a minute. If we want to be able to farm and produce healthy, nutrient-dense food going forward, we have no choice but to take better care of our landscapes. That begins with care of the soil. Otherwise ... food production will only continue to become more and more difficult and food shortages more commonplace. Let's regenerate!

Gail Fuller is a recovering conventional farmer. From a 3,200 acre corn and soybean farm near Emporia to a 162 acre food farm near Severy, his life in the Flint Hills has been full of ups and downs, but his passion for healthy food and healthy communities has been steadfast.



Fenceline
Ian Huebert