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Large-Scale Dryland Cropping Systems

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Large-Scale Dryland Cropping Systems

Cover Page Footnote

The U.S. Department of Agriculture, Agricultural Research Service Ogallala Aquifer Program partially supported this research project.

Large-Scale Dryland Cropping Systems

A. Schlegel and L. Haag

Summary

This study was conducted from 2008 to 2016 at the Kansas State University Southwest Research-Extension Center near Tribune, KS. The purpose of the study was to identify whether more intensive cropping systems can enhance and stabilize production in rainfed cropping systems to optimize economic crop production, more efficiently capture and utilize scarce precipitation, and maintain or enhance soil resources and environmental quality. The crop rotations evaluated were continuous grain sorghum (SS), wheat-fallow (WF), wheat-corn-fallow (WCF), wheat-sorghum-fallow (WSF), wheat-corn-sorghum-fallow (WCSF), and wheat-sorghum-corn-fallow (WSCF). All rotations were grown using no-tillage practices except for WF, which was grown using reduced-tillage. The efficiency of precipitation capture was not greater with more intensive rotations. Length of rotation did not affect wheat yields. Corn yields were about 55% and grain sorghum yields about 70% greater when following wheat than when following corn or grain sorghum. Grain sorghum yields were about 60% greater than corn in similar rotations.

Introduction

The change from conventional tillage to no-tillage cropping systems has allowed for greater intensification of cropping in semi-arid regions. In the central High Plains, wheat-fallow (1 crop in 2 years) has been a popular cropping system for many decades. This system is being replaced by more intensive wheat-summer crop-fallow rotations (2 crops in 3 years). There has also been increased interest in further intensifying the cropping systems by growing 3 crops in 4 years or continuous cropping. This project evaluates several multi-crop rotations that are feasible for the region, along with alternative systems that are more intensive than 2- or 3-year rotations. The objectives are to 1) enhance and stabilize production of rainfed cropping systems using multiple crops and rotations, using best management practices to optimize capture and utilization of precipitation for economic crop production, and 2) enhance adoption of alternative rainfed cropping systems that provide optimal profitability.

Experimental Procedures

The crop rotations are 2-year (wheat-fallow [WF]); 3-year (wheat-grain sorghum-fallow [WSF] and wheat-corn-fallow [WCF]); 4-year rotations (wheat-corn-sorghum-fallow [WCSF] and wheat-sorghum-corn-fallow [WSCF]); and continuous sorghum [SS]). All rotations are grown using no-tillage (NT) practices except for WF, which is grown using reduced-tillage (RT). All phases of each rotation are present each year. Plot size is a minimum of 100 × 450 ft. In most instances, grain yields were determined by har-

vesting the center 60 ft (by entire length) of each plot with a commercial combine and determining grain weight with a weigh-wagon or combine yield monitor. Soil water was measured in 12-inch increments to 96 inches near planting and after harvest either gravimetrically (RT WF) or by neutron attenuation (NT plots).

Results and Discussion

Precipitation averaged 98% of normal (17.90 in.) across the 9-yr study period and was near normal (+/- 15%) in 6 out of 9 years with two wet years (>20% above normal) and one exceptionally dry year (42% of normal) (Figure 1). Fallow accumulation, fallow efficiency, and profile available water at wheat planting was greater with WF than all other wheat rotations (Table 1). The fallow efficiencies of the 3- and 4-yr NT rotations were only 54-68% of WF under RT. With more water available, crop water use was also greater with WF than with wheat in other rotations. There were no differences in available water at wheat planting or crop water use among the 3- and 4-yr rotations.

Fallow accumulation prior to corn planting and profile available soil water at planting was greater following wheat (WCF or WCSF) than following grain sorghum (WSCF) (Table 1). However, the fallow period following wheat was longer, resulting in low fallow efficiencies (~17%) following wheat and only 24% following sorghum. Similar to wheat, corn water use was greater with greater available soil water at planting. Grain sorghum responded similarly to corn, with greater fallow accumulation and soil water at planting (and greater crop water use) when following wheat than following corn or sorghum. Again, fallow efficiencies prior to grain sorghum were low (20% or less).

Wheat yields were much greater than normal in 2016 and were greater than 50 bu/a for all treatments (Figure 2). The effect of cropping systems was not consistent across years, with WF sometimes in the highest yielding group and sometimes in the lowest yielding group. Averaged across the 9 years, cropping system had little effect on wheat yields.

Similar to wheat, grain sorghum yields were very good in 2016, with all treatments producing yields of 100 bu/a or greater (Figure 3). Consistent with earlier years, sorghum yields were higher following wheat than either corn or sorghum. Average grain sorghum yields following wheat were about 70% greater than following corn or sorghum.

Corn yields were also very good in 2016 (Figure 4). Corn yields following wheat in either the 3- or 4-yr rotations were always greater than corn yields following grain sorghum, except in 2015, where corn yields following sorghum (wsCf) were great than wCf. On average, corn yields following wheat were about 55% greater than following grain sorghum.

When examining grain yields across crops, the greatest yields were produced by grain sorghum following wheat (either wSf or wScf) of about 70 bu/a (Figure 5). These yields were about 60% greater than corn following wheat (wCf or wCsf). Sorghum yields following wheat were about 70% greater than sorghum following corn or sorghum (wcSf or SS) while corn yields following wheat (wCf or wCsf) were more than 55% greater than following sorghum.

Acknowledgments

This research project received support from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Agricultural Research Service Ogallala Aquifer Program.

Table 1. Fallow accumulation, fallow efficiency, profile (8 ft) available soil water at planting, and crop water use by wheat, corn, and grain sorghum in several crop rotations, Tribune, KS, 2008-2016

Crop	Rotation	Fallow	Fallow	Profile	Crop water
		accumulation	efficiency	ASW at planting ²	
		inch	%	----- inch -----	
Wheat	W ^f	6.41a	28a	9.32a	17.31a
	W ^{sf}	2.79bc	19b	6.07b	13.44b
	W ^{cf}	2.33c	15c	5.79b	13.36b
	W ^{scf}	3.09b	19b	6.03b	13.59b
	W ^{csf}	2.79bc	17b	6.15b	13.46b
LSD _{0.05}		0.50	3	0.61	0.52
Corn	wC ^f	2.36a	17b	5.46a	13.64a
	wC ^{sf}	2.14a	16b	5.36a	13.54a
	wsC ^f	1.38b	24a	4.38b	12.87b
LSD _{0.05}		0.38	3	0.62	0.40
Grain sorghum	wS ^f	2.27b	15b	5.54a	12.86a
	wS ^{cf}	2.76a	18ab	5.91a	13.19a
	wcS ^f	1.26c	16b	4.66b	12.18b
	SS	1.62c	20a	4.75b	12.16b
LSD _{0.05}		0.38	3	0.61	0.39

¹ Wheat-fallow rotation is reduced-tillage; all other rotations are no-tillage. Means within a column with the same letter for the same crop are not statistically different at $P = 0.05$. The capital letter in the rotation denotes the crop phase of the rotation.

² Available soil water (ASW) in an 8 ft profile at planting.

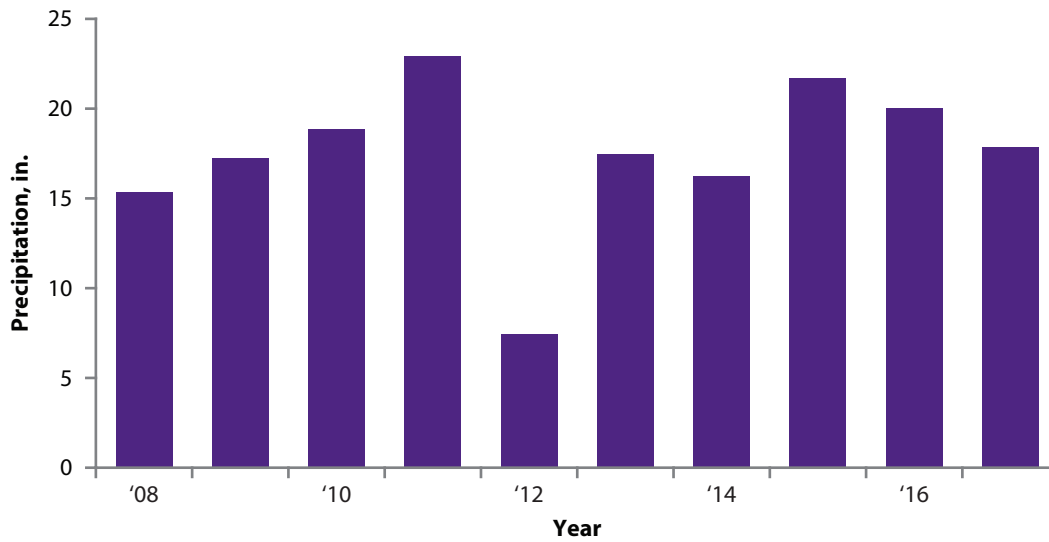


Figure 1. Annual (2008-2016) and normal precipitation (1981-2010, last bar), Tribune, KS.

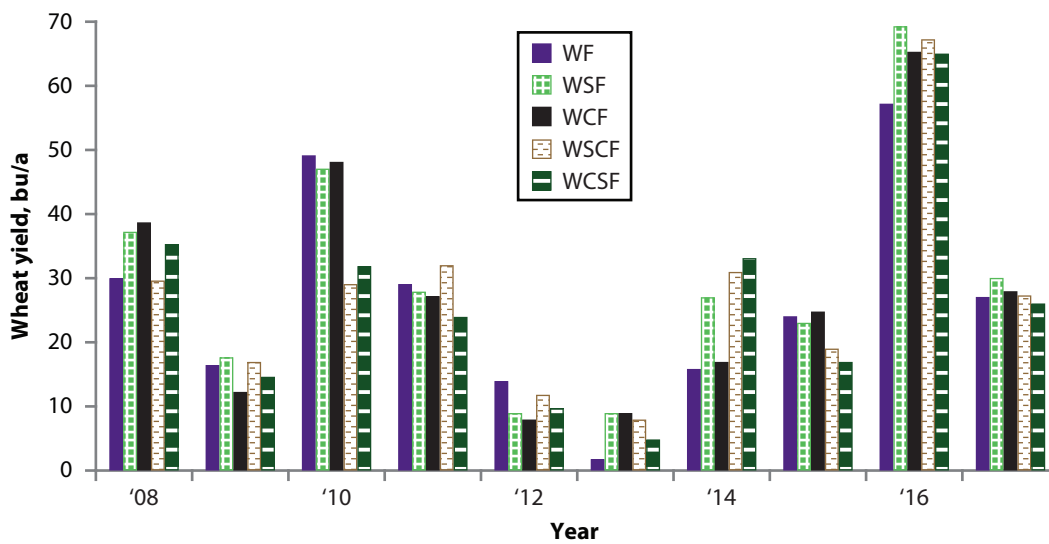


Figure 2. Wheat yields by cropping system, 2008-2016. Last set of columns are treatment means. Wheat-fallow (WF), wheat-sorghum-fallow (WSF), wheat-corn-fallow (WCF), wheat-corn-sorghum-fallow (WSCF), and wheat-sorghum-corn-fallow (WCSF).

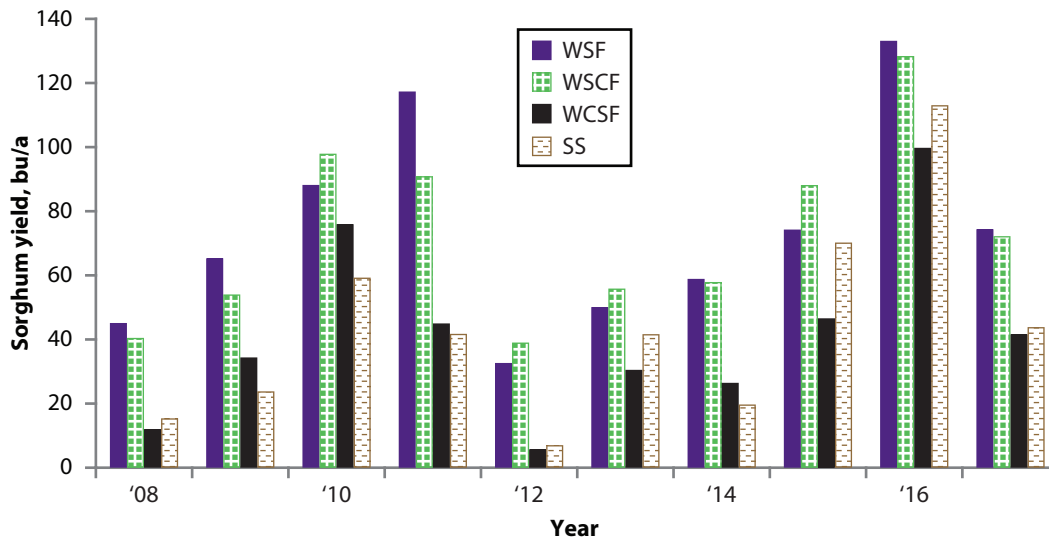


Figure 3. Grain sorghum yields by cropping system, 2008-2016. Last set of columns are treatment means. Wheat-sorghum-fallow (WSF), wheat-sorghum-corn-fallow (WSCF), wheat-corn-sorghum-fallow (WCSF), and continuous grain sorghum (SS).

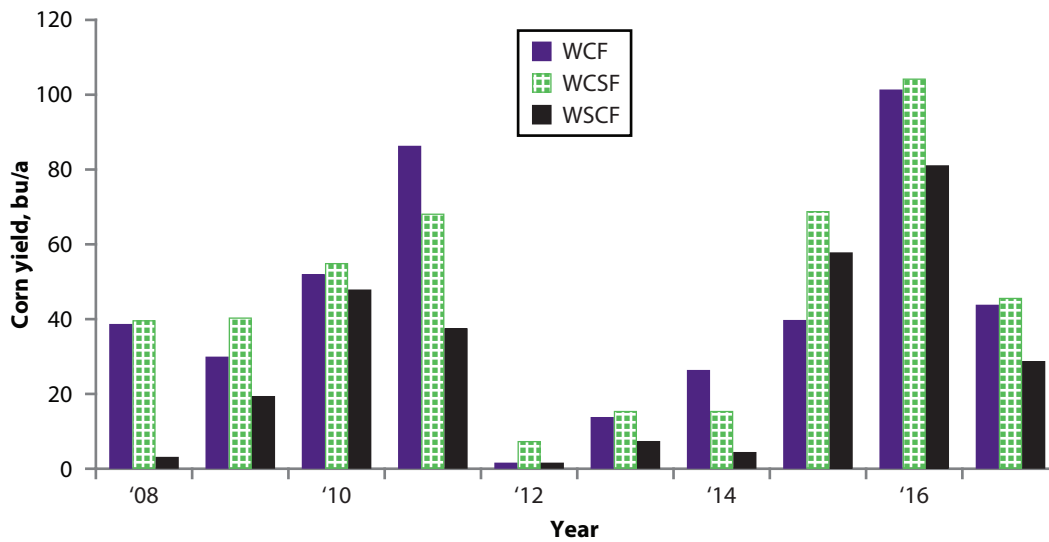


Figure 4. Corn yields by cropping system, 2008-2016. Last set of columns are treatment means. Wheat-corn-fallow (WCF), wheat-corn-sorghum-fallow (WCSF), and wheat-sorghum-corn-fallow (WCSF).

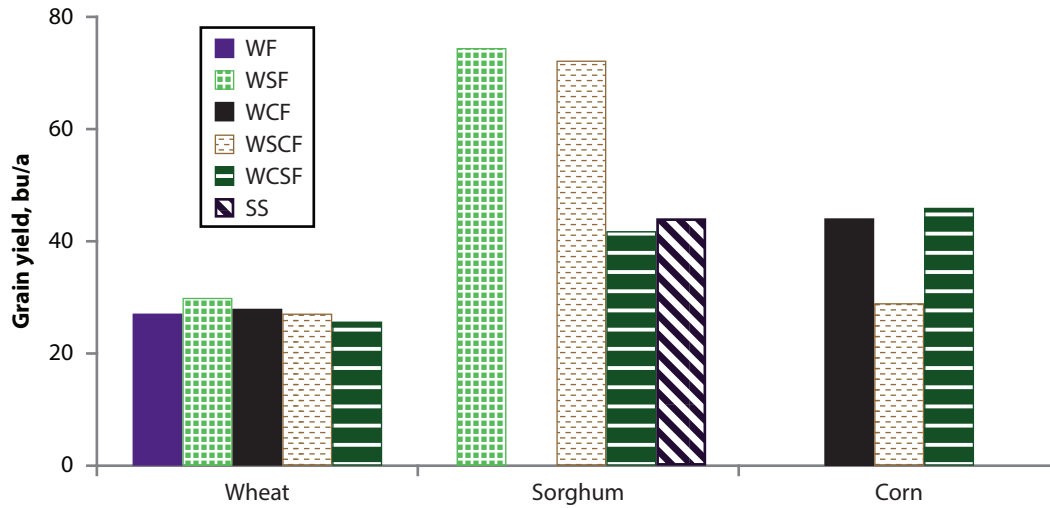


Figure 5. Average grain yields by cropping system, 2008-2016. Wheat-fallow (WF), wheat-sorghum-fallow (WSF), wheat-corn-fallow (WCF), wheat-sorghum-corn-fallow (WSCF), wheat-corn-sorghum-fallow (WCSF), and continuous grain sorghum (SS).