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Managing the Cost of Corn Harvest Moisture

Grain moisture is the defining factor for when to begin corn harvest, but there are other considerations that come into play. Lodging risk, combine loss, yield disappearance, and the number of days needed to harvest your crop are all factors to take into consideration. Regardless of whether you begin harvest this week, or hold off until mid-September there are opportunity costs to consider.

The first cost, moisture, is actually measurable. There are hundreds of on-farm grain dryers throughout the county. Each one is unique regarding its energy efficiency and cost of operation. The best advice I have for determining the cost of on-farm drying is to keep good records. Measure what goes through it in a season. Track utility, depreciation, repair, and maintenance expenses on per bushel accounting for a couple of years. Compare your actual costs to commercial drying charges. I suspect that even the most inefficient dryer will cost less than commercial prices, but if you are pushing close to their pricing, it may be time to evaluate your system for an upgrade.

For a simple corn harvest moisture cost example, I'll use commercial shrink and drying charges and a fall cash price of \$3.80. If you are drying on-farm, your cost should be less than this. If you are hauling wet corn from field to market, this is your reality. In this example 50 acres of corn made 10,000 bushels at 20% moisture. Using local grain discount charts the

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moisture discount for 20% moisture corn is \$.20/wet bushel. 10,000 bu multiplied by 0.20 results in a settlement reduction of \$2,000.00. The weight shrink for 20% moisture corn is 6.31% of net weight. 10,000 bushels of 56-pound-per-bushel corn is 560,000 pounds. The shrink is 35,336 pounds or 631 bushels. So... 9,369 bushels at \$3.80 is \$35,602.20. Subtracting the moisture discount results in a settlement of \$33,602.20.

Let's consider allowing this corn to dry to 17% harvest moisture. The initial 560,000 pounds at 20% moisture will weigh 540,512 pounds at 17% moisture. Using the discount chart, the moisture discount is \$.08/wet bushel. 540,512 divided by 56 pounds per bushel is 9,652 bushels. 9,652 bu multiplied by 0.08 results in a settlement reduction of \$772.16. The weight shrink for 17% moisture corn is 2.83%. The shrink is 15,297 or 273 bushels. So... 9,379 bushels at \$3.80 is \$35,640.00. Subtracting the moisture discount results in a settlement of \$34,868.00.

The difference of these harvest moistures is a \$1,266.00 advantage for allowing corn to dry down to 17%. So what about the other factors which all relate to risk of harvest loss by letting corn dry? They are real, they are scary, and they are why no one would ever wait until December to begin corn harvest. Just to keep it simple, \$1,266.00 divided by \$3.80 is 333 bushels. Divided by 50 acres is 6.66 bushels per acre. I can't estimate what your harvest loss will be. That is up to the wind and combine operator to determine. I do know a 6.66 bushel per acre harvest loss is equal to 12 kernels per square foot left in the field. That would be excessive even for a novice combine operator.

Combine harvest loss is only one risk of letting corn dry. Weather is the greatest outlier. A wind can come and result in much more than 6.66 bushels of loss, triple the time, fuel, and equipment wear compared to harvesting standing acreage. Wet weather can come and delay

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harvest activities for scattered days or possibly a week, pushing the finish to harvest later into the fall, and adding to stress on family and employees.

After you've made the decision to begin harvest, the next question is what can be done to add some market value? The answer is, of course, storage after the fall contracts are filled. As of last week, the market and basis were providing \$0.40 per bushel if you can deliver in December instead of the fall. Making the \$3.80 example above become \$4.20 is an incentive worth considering if short-term storage is an option. We haven't adopted grain bags in this area yet, but they work great and are widely used in other areas of the country. In South America, they are the primary resource for on-farm storage. If you're not ready for bags, consider cleaning out a tool shed to use. The University of Kentucky has an online calculator to determine storage capacity and cfm air movement required for bins, buildings, and piles available at <https://bae.ca.uky.edu/extension/grain-storage-systems>.

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