



Should Texas Southern High Plains Cotton Farmers Be Concerned about Karnal Bunt in Wheat? (Yes)

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Karnal bunt in wheat has not been found in the Texas Southern High Plains yet, and we hope it stays that way. There are a couple of scenarios, however, that could sneak up on cotton farmers and others that could cause problems down the road that we want to alert you to. The cool, wet spring this past year in portions of the Rolling Plains reminds us that there is risk, and a lot of inconvenience, due to the spread of this disease. Although the Texas Southern High Plains does not produce a large amount of wheat for grain, growers of wheat, durum wheat, and triticale (but not other small grains) could face Karnal bunt in coming years.

With that said, here's what producers other than wheat grain growers, including cotton farmers, may be thinking and saying:

"I won't be growing any wheat for grain..."

"I just graze out all the wheat I have..."

"I only seed wheat for terminated cover for my cotton..."

"I only sew down a few dryland corners..."

For these reasons, growers may wrongly assume that Karnal bunt will not affect them. Well, what about cotton farmers and other growers who do not grow wheat for grain? What if your program is strictly wheat grazing, a cover crop for dryland corners or for seedling cotton protection? Is Karnal bunt of any concern whatsoever? Are there management implications for cotton farmers as well, if they seed wheat for other purposes?

Yes, Karnal bunt is a concern in several ways, including the above objections. The potential cannot be ignored by cotton growers, if you have any wheat for any purpose on your farm, for a couple of reasons. These include:

1. potential spread of the disease in planting seed regardless whether wheat is grown for grain, grazing, or cover,
2. the possibility that in the future a grower may elect to grow wheat,

3. the potential restriction on livestock movement if your county should become quarantined at a later date.

If infected seed is planted then spores can lie dormant for at least 5 years. Some growers are starting to look at growing winter small grains as a means to reduce the number of acres they are trying to irrigate during the summer. If wheat seed with Karnal bunt inoculum is planted as cover in 2001 and the farmer decides to grow wheat in a subsequent year in that field, infection problems could be encountered. Karnal bunt can also be introduced through wheat planted just for conventional cover. Spores could still be spread to other fields through tillage tools or possible movement via other means.

Bottom Line—Yes, the prospect of Karnal bunt cannot be ignored by cotton growers. Infected seed is the most likely risk for the region. By all means, increase the odds that your wheat is free from Karnal bunt by beginning with a reputable seed dealer or other known source of uninfested seed.

No one wants the Karnal bunt fungus on their farm. If you get it, not only you but your neighbor will have great difficulty marketing grain, moving livestock, and will have to deal with a lot of government regulation.

For further information contact your local Texas Cooperative Extension office for the factsheet ‘Karnal Bunt in Texas Wheat,’ by Travis Miller, also available at <http://soil-testing.tamu.edu/publications/872792-karnalbunt.pdf> County offices also have information about seed treatment options, which reduce (but do not eliminate) the potential for the disease. Finally, USDA maintains information about the biology and regulation of Karnal bunt at <http://www.aphis.usda.gov/ppq/emergencyprograms/karnalbunt/>