

# Chance of a Lifetime

by Matt Hagny

*The original story on States appeared in the Dec. '03 issue.*



We last reported on Alan States amidst a record-breaking drought, which didn't relinquish until 2007 (although '05 was, in his words, "halfway reasonable"). 2007 was a banner year for States, not just in terms of production but also in profitability since he had purchased '07 fertilizer in '06, and sold the '07 crop in early '08. (Uncanny, isn't it? —States' market instincts serve him well.)

Weather in '08 proved "challenging," but due to extreme *excess* moisture, which presented some new problems—for instance: rill erosion, especially where 'foreign' water drains across States' fields from adjacent land. Because of abundant summer rains, his soybean crop was a bumper 46 bu/a, but quite slow to mature and dry down. When he first started cutting beans, it was bone-dry in the top foot and the drill wouldn't have gone in the ground to plant wheat. Then it got *really* muddy, which almost entirely prevented his wheat planting in soybean stubble (he did get a few acres mudded in).

So, other than 55 acres of wheat after field peas, States will have no wheat crop for '09 on his 6,800 acres of cropland. Is he concerned? Not so much. States actually had a stacked wheat program for a couple years, but lately has dropped the 2d-year wheat: "Corn and soybeans have been more profitable than wheat in recent years. Soybeans have actually carried us the last two years." So he will be a corn – soybean farmer in Phillips County, KS?! He adds some caveats: "Corn has never been successful for us planted into anything

except wheat stubble. But this is an exceptional circumstance where the soil [moisture] profile is completely full in the soybean stubble." So he will roll the dice in '09 with corn into soybean stubble, and accept the consequences of the workload crunch. "Then we've got to get back to some semblance of a rotation. . . . We really need wheat in the rotation to keep residue levels up. Our residue disappears too quickly."

Eventually States envisions returning to a rotation with stacked wheat. He continues to grow predominantly corn rather than milo, partly due to

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profitability and partly due to some fields with shattercane. '08 was his first attempt at field peas, which made 30 bu/a, but he's quite cautious about replacing many soybean acres with peas.

States remains frugal on machinery, although the lineup has grown to handle his added acres and better yields: two 2588 combines, a 40-ft JD 1890 (7.5-inch spacing) with 430-bu cart, a 16-row Case-IH 1250 front-fold planter, a newer 4WD tractor and a MFD (both with auto-steer), and a couple grain carts and semis. When the crop warrants it, States hires custom harvesters with 4 additional combines. States continues his business relationship with Jay Hofaker for operating the machin-

ery and overseeing field operations when States is absent (which is frequent, since he does have a bank to run), although Hofaker also has his own sizable farming operation. States relies on Randy Kiser's custom spraying service, too.

States continues to use surface broadcast urea to supply his N needs for wheat and corn, and has generally tried to build P levels in fields that are low, most of which goes out as 11-52-0 as pop-up in the wheat (corn gets pop-up of 10-34-0). Alan has begun adding S and Zn fertilization, as prilled ammonium sulfate and zinc sulfate blended into his other dry fertilizers.

States reflects on the recent (June '08) spike in virtually all commodity prices (not just grains) and their subsequent collapse: "These opportunities only come along about once in a career. Back in the '74 era, we had this fantastic spike in grain prices [a bigger spike than '08, inflation-adjusted]. A few people took great advantage of that. But people who thought it would last soon found themselves in trouble." He continues, "The lessons are the same now as they were then: Be efficient on equipment, and get the debt paid down. . . . In grain farming, out of 30 years, you might only have 2 fantastic years. No-till and these other efficiencies are about surviving all those other years. And hopefully we'll do something right with [the substantial profits] instead of farming until it's gone."

Alan was fresh out of the military in '74, and only had about 15 acres of wheat—so he didn't benefit greatly from that episode. But he learned. This time, he admits to doing considerably better. 🌾