Issue 1091

K-STATE Research and Extension

Extension Agronomy

eUpdate

02/19/2026

These e-Updates are a regular weekly item from K-State Extension Agronomy and Kathy Gehl, Agronomy eUpdate Editor. All of the Research and Extension faculty in Agronomy will be involved as sources from time to time. If you have any questions or suggestions for topics you'd like to have us address in this weekly update, contact Kathy Gehl, 785-532-3354 kgehl@ksu.edu, or Dalas Peterson, Extension Agronomy State Leader and Weed Management Specialist 785-532-0405 dpeterso@ksu.edu.

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1. Potential Effects of Warm Winter Temperatures on the Wheat Crop

After the cold snap in late January, temperatures have been on the rise. In fact, since the start of February, average temperatures have been as much as 12-13°F above normal (Figure 1). The forecast indicates that while we will have a brief period of near-normal conditions this weekend, warmer-than-normal conditions are expected to return in March. The effects of these warmer-than-average temperatures on the wheat crop are concerning producers and crop consultants.

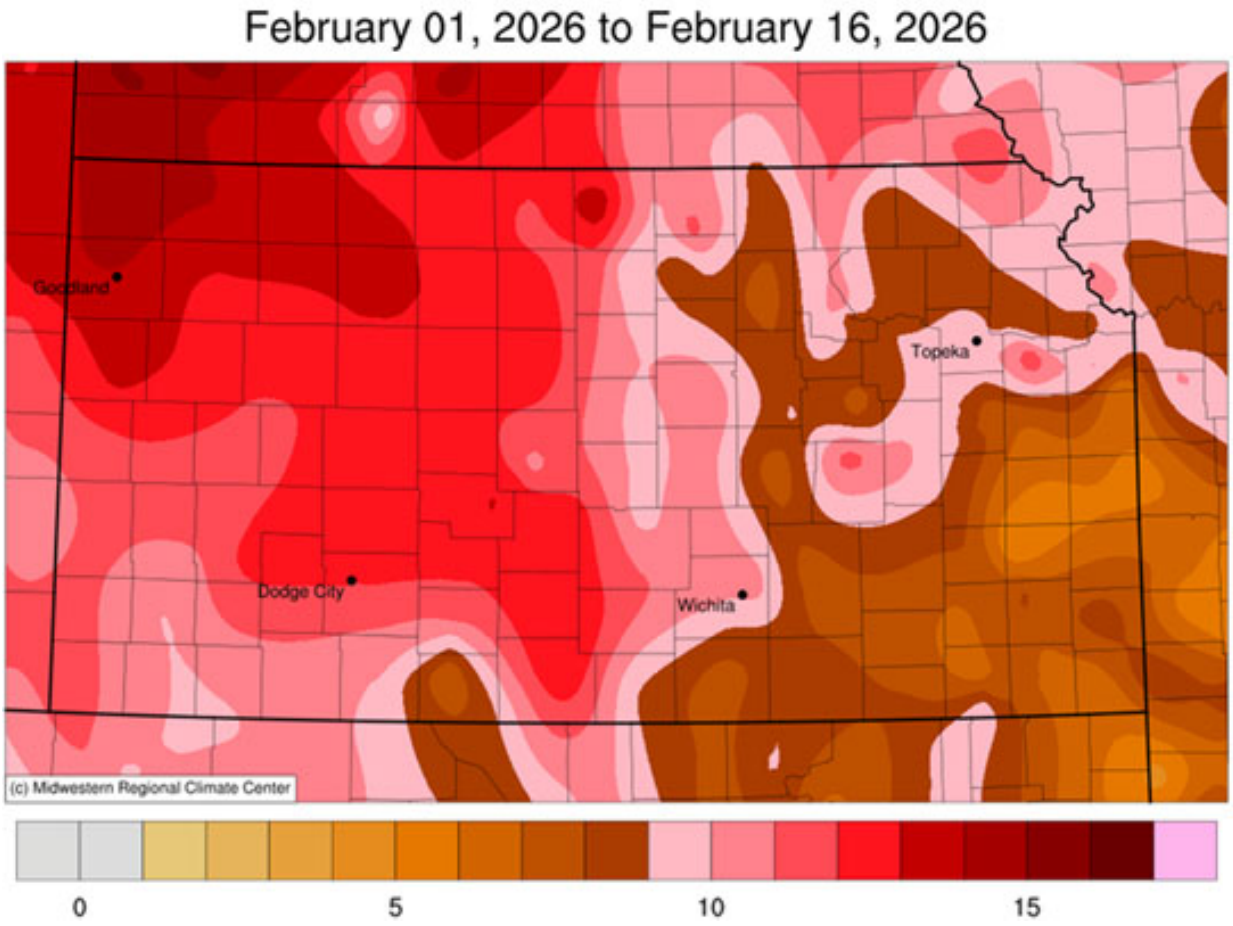


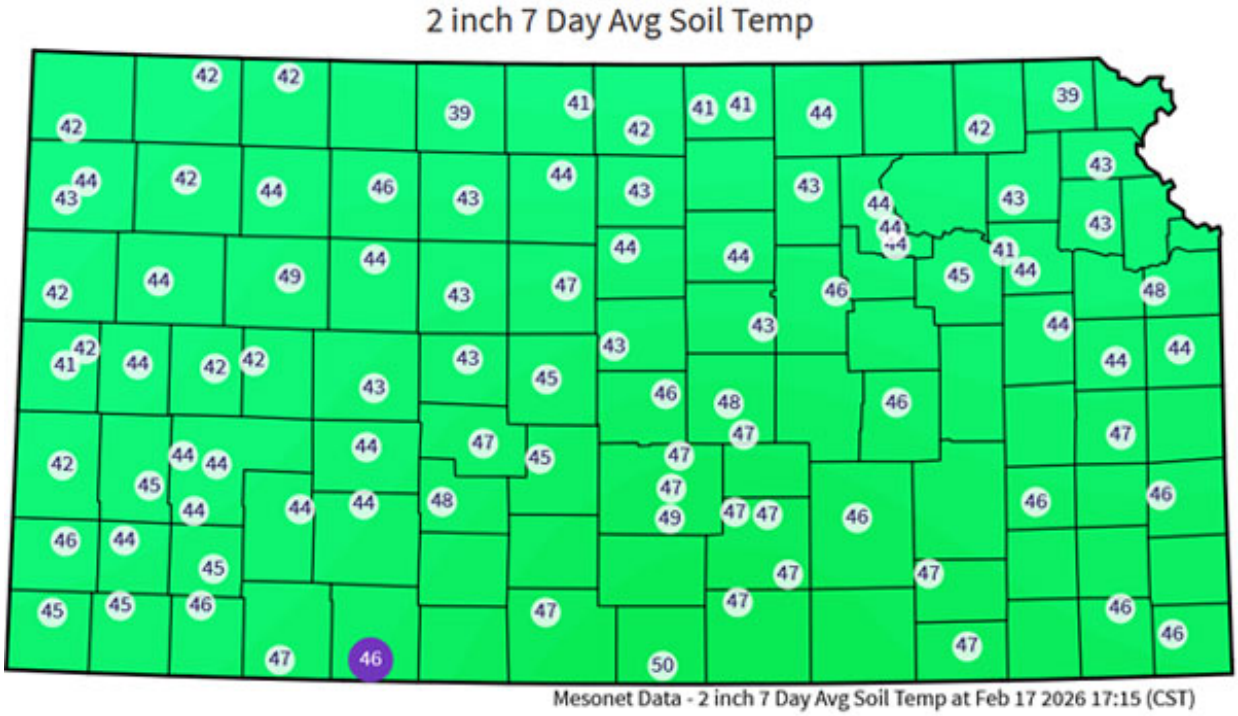
Figure 1. Departure from normal weekly mean temperatures for the period February 1-16 from the Midwest Regional Climate Center.

How warm have soil temperatures been?

The physiology of wheat vernalization and cold hardiness suggests that soil temperatures at the crown level, rather than air temperatures, should be the primary driver leading to increased or decreased cold hardiness during the winter. Soil temperatures will be influenced by the amount of residue on the soil surface as well as by soil moisture. Soils with a thick surface residue layer often have lower temperatures than bare soils, as the residue blocks direct sunlight and reduces evaporation, generally conserving more moisture. Moist soils require more energy than dry soils to

cause any temperature change; thus, any increase or decrease in temperature occurs more slowly than in dry soils.

Soil temperatures at the 2-inch depth ranged from less than 39°F in the northeast portion of the state to as high as 50°F in the southern border of the state (Figure 2). The warmest soil temperatures were in the southern three tiers of counties, east from Comanche/Kiowa/Edwards counties. Soil moisture in this region (Figure 2, bottom panel) is fairly high after the recent rainfall, ranging from 70% to 90% saturated.



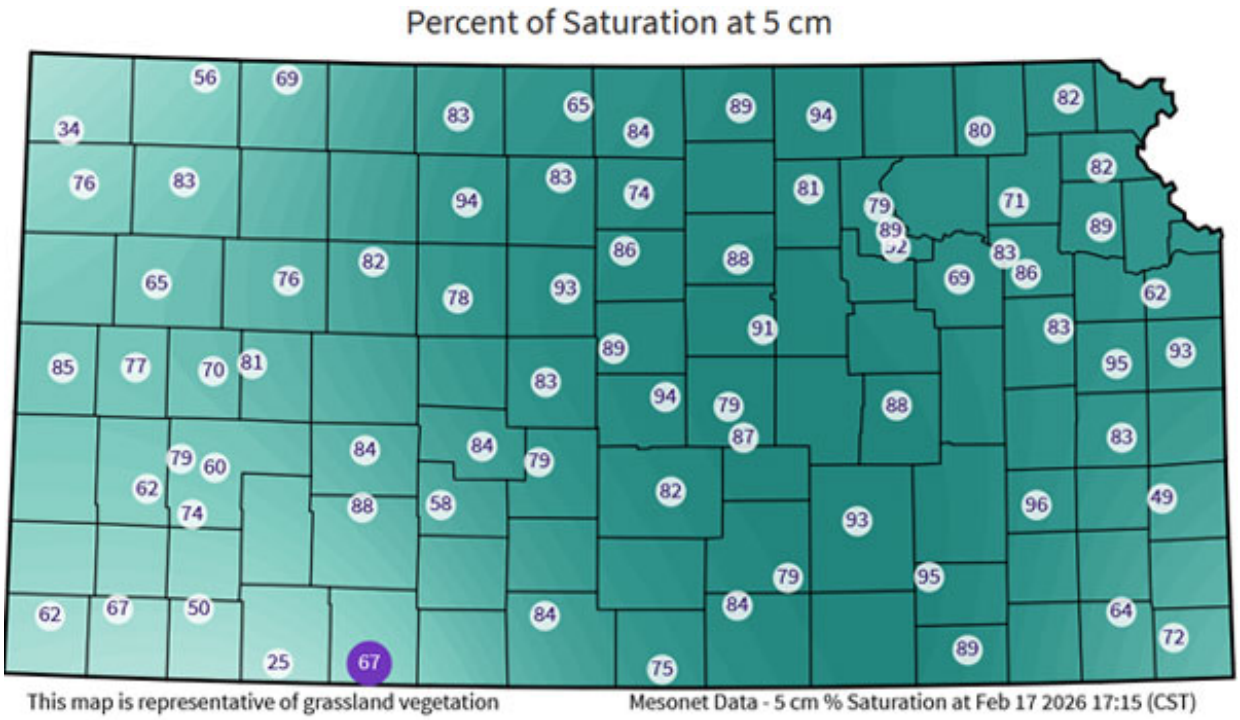
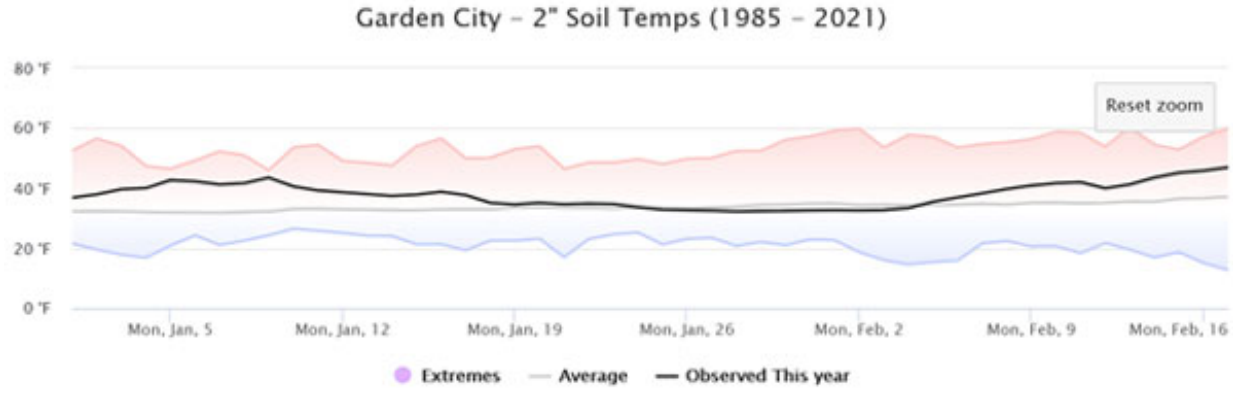


Figure 2. Weekly 2-inch average soil temperatures across the state of Kansas during the February 10-17 period (upper panel) and coinciding soil moisture percent saturation at the same depth (lower panel).

Average temperatures are very close to the 48°F threshold for winter wheat to begin losing cold hardiness (Figure 3). In particular, locations such as Garden City, Parsons, and Hutchinson are trending well above normal and exceeding the 48°F threshold.



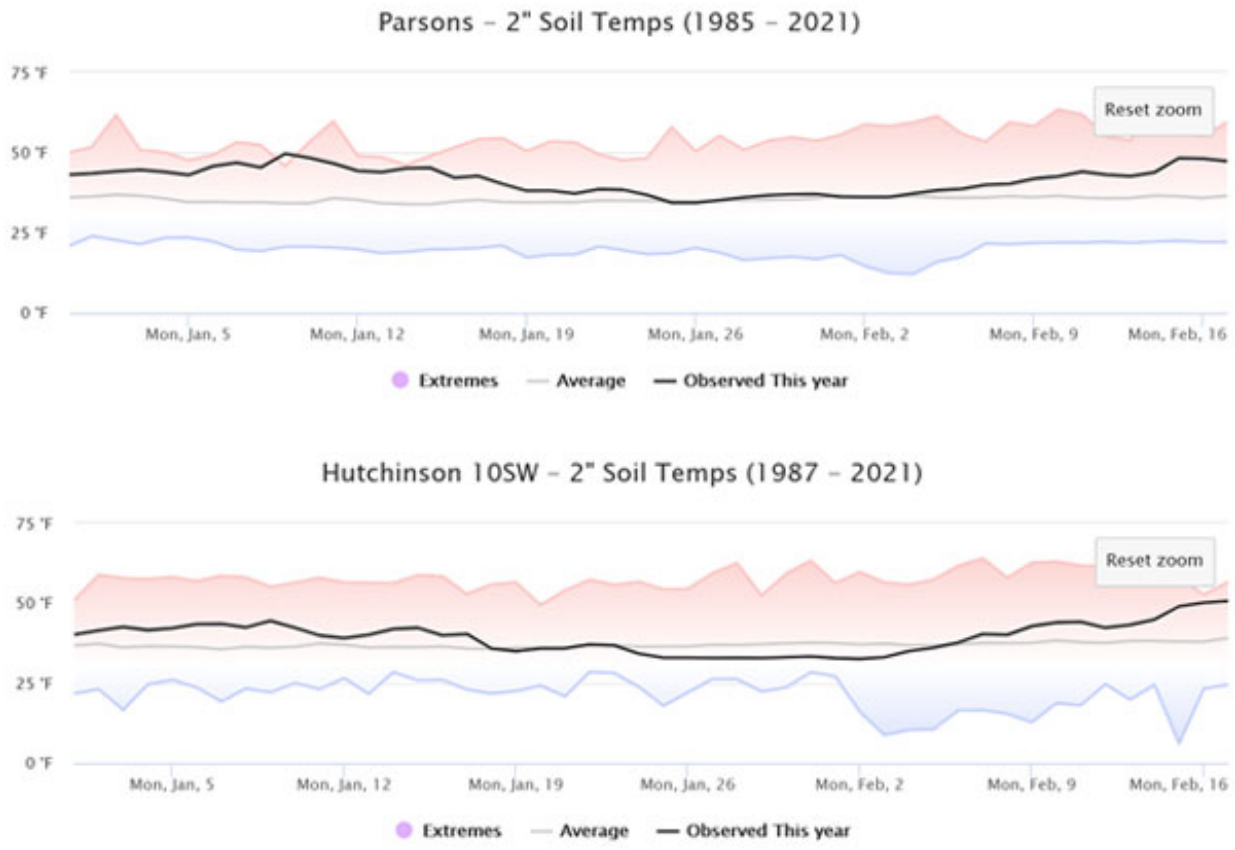


Figure 3. Soil temperature trends compared to normal at the 2-inch depth during the 1/1/20126 to 2/8/2026 period.

Understanding the vernalization process in winter wheat

Winter hardiness or cold tolerance is a physiological process triggered by gradually cooling temperatures in the fall. During cold acclimation, there is a reduction in cell moisture content in the crown, which slows growth and the accumulation of soluble carbohydrates, both of which help protect cell membranes from freeze damage.

The process of cold acclimation within a sufficiently developed wheat seedling begins when soil temperatures at crown depth fall below about 50°F. Wheat plants will acclimate twice as fast when crown temperatures are 32°F as compared to 40°F. Photoperiod also plays a role in cold hardening, with shorter days and longer nights helping initiate it. Winter survival depends on the crown remaining alive, and the substances that produce cold acclimation are most needed within the crown.

It takes about 4 to 6 weeks of soil temperatures below 50°F at the depth of the crown for winter wheat to fully cold harden. The colder the soil at the crown depth, the more quickly the plants will develop winter hardiness.

Temperature fluctuations during the winter and their effects on wheat cold hardiness

Cold hardiness is not a static state. After the cold hardening process begins in the fall, wheat plants can rapidly unharden when soil temperatures at the crown depth rise above 50°F, but reharden as the crown temperature cools below 50°F. By the time winter begins, winter wheat will normally have reached its maximum level of cold hardiness. Wheat in Kansas typically reaches its maximum winter hardiness from mid-December to mid-January, unless high temperatures occur during that period.

Once winter wheat has reached the level of full cold hardiness, it will remain cold hardy as long as crown temperatures remain below about 32 degrees – assuming the plants had a good supply of energy going into the winter.

If soil temperatures at the crown depth rise to 50°F or more for a prolonged period, there will be a gradual loss of cold hardiness, even in the middle of winter. The warmer the crown temperature during winter, the more quickly the plants will begin to lose their maximum level of cold hardiness. Winter wheat can re-harden during the winter if it loses its full level of winter hardiness, but it will not regain its maximum level of winter hardiness.

As soil temperatures at the crown level rise to 50°F or more, usually in late winter or spring, winter wheat will gradually lose its winter hardiness entirely. Photoperiod also plays a role in this process. A sign of wheat de-hardening will be leaves changing from prostrate to upright.

Possible consequences to the wheat crop

The effect of the high soil temperatures in the late-January to early-February period on the wheat crop will depend on several factors, particularly on temperatures during the remainder of February and early March.

Where temperatures were consistently close to 50°F and fluctuated little during the recent period, as in many areas of southern Kansas, the high temperatures should cause a gradual loss of cold hardiness. The warmer the crown temperature has been during this recent period, the more quickly the plants will begin to lose their maximum level of cold hardiness.

The forecast indicates that while we will have a brief period of near-normal conditions this weekend, warmer-than-normal temperatures are expected to return in March. Winter wheat can re-harden to some extent during the winter, even if it loses its full level of winter hardiness, but it will not regain its maximum level of winter hardiness. Thus, in the regions where soil temperatures have been warmest, the crop may be less tolerant to low temperatures for the remainder of this winter, becoming more susceptible to freeze injury if temperatures decrease to single digits in the near future.

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2. Options for Damaged or Dead Brome Hayfields

This past year (2025) was hard on forage producers once again, with fall armyworms arriving in late July and overstaying their welcome through the long, warm fall. Many across eastern Kansas reported a complete or partial loss of their brome stands (Figure 1). Brome field damage varied greatly, with some fields that appear dead, while others have no damage at all. The majority of the damaged areas were the late-harvested fields cut in mid-to-late July and after. Fall armyworm moths used those recently harvested fields to lay their eggs. Fall armyworm moths can lay their eggs on almost any foliar material, and once hatched, the larvae march for a food source.

Figure 1. Dead brome field in eastern Kansas. Photo credit: Rod Schaub, K-State Extension.

When brome is cut late in July, it's growing in suboptimal conditions, as it's a cool-season grass that doesn't like 90°F temperatures. Limited leaf material left after cutting leaves the crown vulnerable (just a few inches tall) to fall armyworm feeding. This feeding, plus limited summer rains, tends to turn the field brown. When we received rain, some fields greened up, but not all of them. With a warmer fall, some fields did not appear to bounce back, and now with the spring temperatures proving to be warmer, many questions are coming up about these damaged fields.

Are the brome plants alive? Is there potential for regrowth?

A drive‐by evaluation can be misleading, especially when grassy annual weeds (such as foxtail) died alongside dormant perennial forage. The only reliable method is to inspect plants directly.

Check for living rhizomes. Dig up a grass clod and examine the rhizomes. Living rhizomes mean new tillers should come up as precipitation comes and temperatures remain warm. Signs of life include roots holding onto soil material or greening up at the root base.

Conduct a bag test. Collect several plant samples, rinse the roots free of soil, and trim shoots to about an inch above the crown. Remove roots, moisten the crowns with cool tap water, and seal the samples in a plastic bag for 2–5 days at room temperature, out of direct sunlight. Living plants will produce new roots and shoots. If no growth occurs within six days, the plant is likely dead.

Management Options

In a "normal" year, with regular supply and input prices (seed, fertilizer, herbicide, etc.), the plan would be to calculate the damaged area, have a well-prepared seedbed, and seed with 10 to 15 pounds of pure live seed (PSL)/acre. If a poor seedbed exists, seeding rates as high as 20 pounds PLS per acre may be required to obtain satisfactory stands. Higher seeding rates should be used when brome is broadcast on the surface and covered. In addition, soil samples should be taken and a fertility program prepared, applying lime, nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium as needed. More information on Smooth Brome production and utilization can be found at: https://bookstore.ksre.ksu.edu/pubs/c402.pdf

With high costs, springtime planting tends to be less ideal than fall planting, and with concerns about another high-damage year of fall armyworm, other forage options may need to be identified. However, we don't know if 2026 will have high fall armyworm pressure. It's always a good idea to prepare and pay attention to when moths start showing up in traps and how fast numbers climb.

1. **Consider alternative forages.** If farmers need to produce forage during spring and summer and are concerned about the cost of brome replanting (seed and fertilizer), they can consider summer annual forages such as pearl millet, sorghum-sudangrass, forage sorghum, and crabgrass. These crops yield 4000 to 8000 lbs of forage/acre. This is also an opportunity to consider seeding spring oats, spring triticale, and cereal rye with production ranging from 1,500 to 4,000 lbs of forage/acre. More details are available at: https://www.agronomy.k-state.edu/documents/extension/mf2871.pdf

2. **Wait and monitor stand recovery.** If immediate brome production isn't essential, growers can observe stands this spring before making a decision. This allows time to assess plant health, monitor input costs, and evaluate market conditions. However, this approach carries financial risk if forage yields end up lower than expected.

3. **Replant brome where necessary.** For producers who rely on brome hay sales and have fields that are clearly dead or severely damaged, reseeding may be necessary. Determine acreage needing establishment and plan for seed, fertilizer (based on soil tests), herbicide, and insecticide as needed. Spring‐planted brome faces significant weed pressure and generally cannot be harvested until the following spring. Fall‐planted brome can be harvested the next growing season.

Final considerations

A damaged or dead brome situation will be very unique in each hayfield. Thus, what your neighbor is doing or has decided to do does not necessarily apply to you and your hayfield. Analyze your field, check the plants, and decide what would be best for your operation. Each field may require a unique solution.

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3. Irrigation Season Preparation: Wheel Track Maintenance

Wheel track maintenance can be a major challenge for many irrigators. Wheel or pivot tracks can be simple "speed bumps" in the field, or they can be severe enough to cause irrigation wear and equipment damage (Figure 1). If severe enough (i.e., deep), wheel tracks can cause wheel and tire damage, slippage of the machine (due to excessive torque on wheel gears), and alteration of the sprinkler spray pattern. Additionally, no one likes having to get a tower unstuck, especially in tall crops like corn. Wheel tracks are bound to happen in every field, every system, but it's the severity of the wheel tracks that cause concern. Soil type, water applications, and cropping system all play into this complex situation. Sometimes wheel tracks can simply signal too frequent or too heavy applications that can be fixed with proper scheduling. However, there still may be concerns. Here are some potential solutions to mitigate or alter wheel tracks.

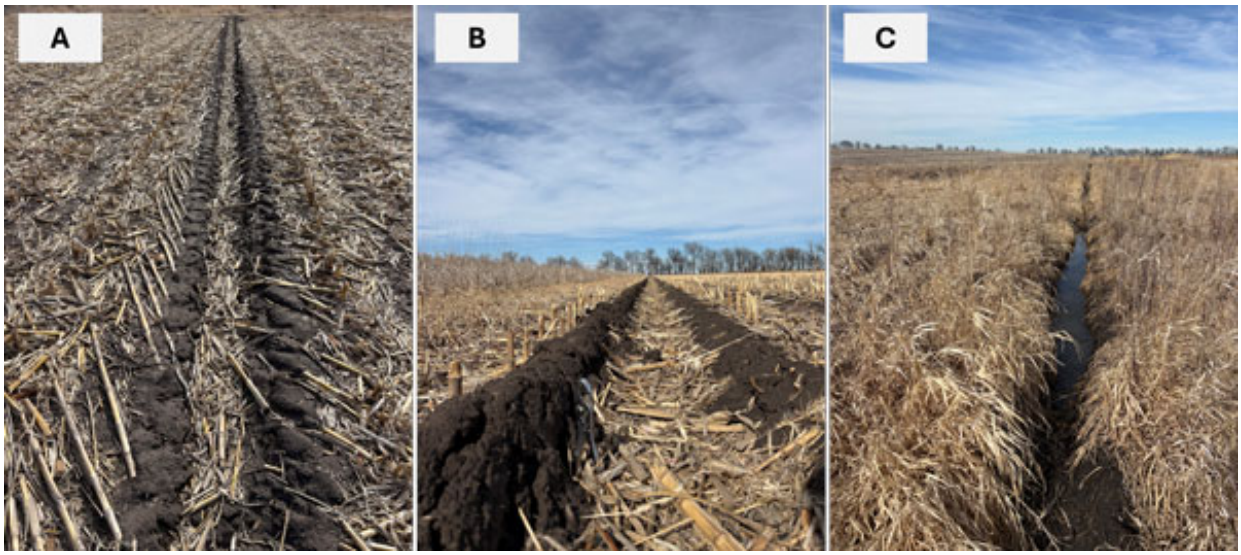

Figure 1. This trio of photos illustrates varying levels of wheel track severity. Photo A is the least severe and can be fixed with light tillage or filled in. Photo B may indicate the weight of wheels pushing and sidewalling soil that can progress over the season. Photo C is a more severe case. In this field, a grass stand does not prevent severe wheel tracks from forming. Standing water indicates an infiltration issue and will cause the system to slow down through the track. Photos by Scott Dooley, K-State Extension.

Potential Solution: Soil pressure from wheels

This would be considered changing the weight per square inch (psi) to which the weight is applied. Realistically, we cannot change the weight of the irrigation system; thus, we would need to adjust the tires and wheels.

Larger wheels and tires: Increasing the size would increase the contact surface area and reduce the pressure on the soil. Increasing tire/wheel adds driveline load, requires higher torque, and may increase drive motor and gear box failure. Additionally, larger tires are often more expensive and can

increase operating costs (i.e., fuel).

Reduce tire pressure: Lowering tire pressure can increase soil surface contact. However, it also increases sidewall flexing and the potential for cracking, ultimately shortening tire life. Tire pressure should not be lowered beyond the manufacturer's recommended range.

Additional wheels and tires: Adding a third tire to a tower can increase soil contact and decrease soil pressure. However, most machines are not fitted for this design, thus requiring additional costs to retrofit the system.

Alternative options: These include adding a track system, airless tire options, angled plating, and cambered configurations. Please note that all of this can lead to additional costs and increased wear on the system.

Potential Solution: Soil structure

It is more common to see troubling wheel tracks in fine-textured (clay) soils, as they lose their bearing strength in the presence of water, as compared with sandy soils. Soil conditioners exist on the market, claiming to bind soil particles together. Some products have worked better than others in university research and are highly dependent on product, soil type, irrigation application, and additional factors. The most tested product includes polyacrylamide (PAM) and has been shown to help bind soil particles together to mitigate erosion in furrow irrigation systems, but when used in wheel tracks, it can cause water pooling. UNL, Oregon State, and USDA Idaho have noted PAM working in such a way, but with limited success when used in wheel tracks, as found in a Utah State University trial. Irrigators should use caution and test small quantities for farm utility.

Potential Solution: Modify the irrigation system

Changing sprinkler applicator spacing and height alters the distribution of applied water, directly affecting runoff, wind drift, and evaporative losses, and consequently how water interacts with wheel tracks. Placing applicators closer to the soil surface concentrates water delivery, allowing managers to intentionally avoid applying water near wheel tracks. However, if not properly managed, this approach can increase the risk of surface runoff and create additional management concerns.

Half-circle sprinklers near the towers can be used to direct water away from wheel tracks. While this approach can reduce water accumulation in wheel tracks, poor design or setup can result in yield losses near the wheel paths. Additionally, when the wetted area is reduced (e.g., by half), nozzle size must be adjusted accordingly to avoid over-applying water to the irrigated area.

Boombacks function similarly to half-circle sprinklers by redirecting water away from the direction of travel. A boomback is an offset sprinkler mounted a set distance behind the pivot lateral, allowing water to be applied after the system has already traversed the area. If a single boomback is installed, then the system can only operate in a single travel direction. A double boomback with a reversible valve allows the system to travel both directions. Either option may increase pressure requirements due to the additional piping.

Modifying span pipe drains can be one of the simplest ways to reduce water applied in wheel tracks, particularly when one has been noted to drain excessively. When functioning properly, automatic drains should only release water during system start-up and shutdown, yet they are often

overlooked during routine maintenance. We do not recommend removing the automatic drain, but instead connecting it to a hose and teeing it into a pressure regulator so the discharge water is routed through a sprinkler and applied away from the wheel track.

Sprinkler removal can be used in severe situations as it simply eliminates water hitting the wheel track. Yield losses can be associated with this method as the irrigation pattern has been changed entirely.

Potential Solution: Filling and maintaining wheel tracks

In some situations, wheel tracks get so deep that they must be filled. Typically, a pivot track closer will be effective to do this during the off-season. Alternatively, soil can be used by compacting and flattening the track with a terrace blade, road grader, or crowder to limit water pooling and rut formation. If needed, materials such as gravel can be added and are effective, but they can affect field operations, including tillage, nutrient application, and planting, and can reduce the farmable area of a field. Straw has also been used in wheel tracks to add structural support. Each option has tradeoffs to consider, including product cost, trucking, labor, and potential impacts on field operations.

Take-Home Message

Many of these options are viable for most operations, but it comes down to what best fits the field, crop rotation, and budget, as these practices can range from a few hundred dollars per acre to thousands based on field size, machine size, and wheel track severity. Methods are generally categorized as those that decrease the pressure on the wet soil by increasing the contact area with the soil, keep water out of the wheel track, and fill the wheel tracks.

References and supplemental materials

https://waterquality.montana.edu/farm-ranch/irrigation/pam/facts.html

https://extension.usu.edu/crops/research/guide-to-pivot-track-management

https://extensionpubs.unl.edu/publication/g1866/na/html/view

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4. Current Kansas Crop Insurance Loss Ratios and Causes of Loss, 2025 Crop Year

By February of each year, insurance payouts reported by the USDA Risk Management Agency can be considered near final. This brief covers loss ratios and causes of loss for all crops and major crops. Loss ratios are calculated as indemnities divided by total premiums, which include both the producer-paid premium and premium subsidy. This information can be used to understand 2025 yield and weather patterns and their economic consequences.

The primary causes of loss reported in Table 1 make up 94% of all losses paid out to date. Both drought and excess moisture were significant contributors to crop losses in 2025. The five causes of loss listed below jointly make up 94% of all losses. Refer to Table 4 below for all causes of loss reported to date for the 2025 crop year.

Table 1. Major Causes of Loss for the 2025 Crop Year for Kansas

Cause of Loss	Indemnities, $ Million
Drought	$110
Excess Moisture/Precipitation/Rain	$91
ARPI/SCO/ECO/STAX/MP/PACE Crops Only	$71
Hail	$31
Heat	$22

Source: USDA Risk Management Agency Summary of Business as of Feb. 12, 2026

Table 2 breaks down loss ratios by crop. Loss ratios are low relative to recent years, but higher for soybeans and wheat. Drought was the largest cause of loss for all crops other than soybeans, for which excess moisture was the largest. For corn and grain sorghum, these are the lowest state-level loss ratios since 2016.

Table 2. Loss Ratio and Major Cause of Loss by Crop, 2025

Crop	State Loss Ratio	Largest Cause of Loss	l argest cause of loss	
			Indemnities, $ Million	Share of Total Losses
Corn	0.21	Drought	46	47%
Grain Sorghum	0.21	Drought	11	35%
Soybeans	0.30	Excess Moisture/Precipitation/Rain	38	74%
Wheat	0.37	Drought	46	53%

Source: USDA Risk Management Agency Summary of Business as of Feb. 12, 2026

Table 3 shows the loss ratio and the largest cause of loss by major crop type for select counties. Counties were selected based on having relatively high loss ratios, geographic representation, and production levels of a particular crop (Some counties with high loss ratios for a particular crop had relatively small production of that crop (some counties with high loss ratios for a particular crop had relatively small production of that crop). Through this analysis, a consistent pattern arises. Across counties in the southeastern part of Kansas, excess moisture was a predominant cause of loss. For most other counties and crops, drought was the predominant cause of loss. For two counties in southwest Kansas, Stanton and Hodgeman, hail damage was the largest cause of loss for wheat.

Table 3. Loss Ratio and Largest Cause of Loss for Select Counties and Crops

County	Crop	Loss Ratio	Largest Cause of Loss
Decatur	All	0.89	Drought
Labette	All	0.89	Excess Moisture/Precipitation/Rain
Sumner	All	0.63	Excess Moisture/Precipitation/Rain
Thomas	All	0.79	Drought
Cloud	Corn	0.70	Drought
Lyon	Corn	0.48	Excess Moisture/Precipitation/Rain
Ness	Corn	0.66	Drought
Sheridan	Corn	0.84	Drought
Cloud	Grain Sorghum	0.73	Drought
Logan	Grain Sorghum	0.68	Drought
Phillips	Grain Sorghum	0.47	Drought
Sumner	Grain Sorghum	0.49	Excess Moisture/Precipitation/Rain
Cherokee	Soybeans	1.59	Excess Moisture/Precipitation/Rain
Cloud	Soybeans	0.48	Drought
Harper	Soybeans	0.41	Excess Moisture/Precipitation/Rain
McpHerson	Soybeans	0.71	Excess Moisture/Precipitation/Rain
Hodgeman	Wheat	0.83	Hail
Stanton	Wheat	0.46	Hail
Sumner	Wheat	0.76	Excess Moisture/Precipitation/Rain
Thomas	Wheat	1.00	Drought

Source: USDA Risk Management Agency Summary of Business as of Feb. 12, 2026

Accompanying maps show loss ratio by county, for all crops, corn, grain sorghum, and wheat. These maps show overall relatively low loss ratios, with pockets of substantially higher loss ratios (maps are available to view on AgManager.info).

Table 4. All Reported Causes of Loss for 2025

Close of Loss	Total Indemnity
Drought	$110,000,000
Excess Moisture/Precipitation/Rain	$90,500,000
ARPI/SCO/ECO/STAX/MP/PACE Crops Only	$70,800,000
Hail	$31,300,000
Heat	$21,900,000
Plant Disease	$4,466,365
Decline in Price	$4,363,453
Hot Wind	$3,730,481
Wind/Excess Wind	$3,377,238
Flood	$2,251,664
Freeze	$913,637
Cold Wet Weather	$702,037
All Other Causes	$685,495
Insects	$387,351
Cold Winter	$302,695
Mycotoxin	$168,850
Other (Snow, Lightning, Etc.)	$144,307
Tornado	$86,094
Wildlife	$77,181
Inability to Prepare Land for Irrigation	$53,593
Failure of Irrigation Supply	$47,873
Frost	$38,325
Failure of Irrigation Equipment	$5,893
Total	$346,302,531

Source: USDA Risk Management Agency Summary of Business as of Feb. 12, 2026

For more information about this publication and others, visit AgManager.info.

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5. Livestock Carcass Handling: Shallow Burial with Carbon Training - April 8

Kansas livestock producers, emergency responders, and animal health professionals are invited to participate in a **Shallow Burial with Carbon (SBC) Training and Demonstration** on April 8, 2026, from 10:00 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. in Manhattan, Kansas.

Led by Gary Flory of G.A. Flory Consulting, the training will provide an in-depth overview of SBC carcass disposal, including the method's benefits, limitations, and best practices for constructing and managing an SBC site. The morning classroom session will be followed by a hands-on outdoor demonstration in the afternoon.

The event will take place at the Kansas State Agronomy North Farm, 2200 Kimball Avenue, in Manhattan. A box lunch will be provided for registered participants.

Registration is required by March 25, 2026.
Participants can register online at: https://fs22.formsite.com/KansasDeptAg/alayuhg2zj/index

For additional information, contact:
Sara McReynolds
Assistant Animal Health Commissioner, Kansas Department of Agriculture
Sara.McReynolds@ks.gov
785-473-6774

Shallow Burial with Carbon Training and Demonstration

April 8, 2026 • 10:00 AM - 3:30 PM
Manhattan, KS

Course Information:

This training will be led by Gary Flory of G.A. Flory Consulting.

The day will begin with a classroom training explaining what shallow burial with carbon (SBC) carcass disposal is, pros and cons to the method, and how to build and manage an SBC site. After a provided box lunch, we will head outside for a field demonstration of constructing an SBC site.

Registration:

Please CLICK HERE or go to agriculture.ks.gov/AnimalHealthOutreach or scan the QR code to register by March 25, 2026.

Kansas Department of Agriculture

Kansas State University Extension

Location:

Kansas State Agronomy Farm
2200 Kimball Avenue
Manhattan, Kansas

Box lunch will be provided!

Registration is required to receive a lunch.

For more information:

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Kansas Department of Agriculture

6. K-State Crop Talk Webinar Series Continues in 2026

The popular K-State Crop Talk online webinar series is back, kicking off on February 10 and continuing through March 10. The Crop Talk series will highlight several topics important to crop producers in north central and northwest Kansas. Topics include flex leases, soil water availability, wheat breeding efforts on mosaic viruses, fungicides for corn and sorghum, and insect control. Continuing education credits will be offered, with one credit for each session.

Each webinar will begin at 12:00 pm (CST) and last until 1:00 pm, beginning with the first one on Tuesday, February 10. If you missed the first one, you can still register to receive links for the upcoming webinars.

Upon registration, participants will receive an email with instructions to attend via Zoom or YouTube. These virtual webinars are open to all and free. Register online at http://www.bit.ly/KSUCropTalk or call your local extension office.

A complete list of webinars, with dates, topics, and speakers, is detailed in the flyer below.

CROPtalk

Broadcast Live from 12:00 – 1:00 pm CT
via Zoom and YouTube

February 10
Understanding Flex Leases
Robin Reid, K-State Extension Ag Economist

February 17
Available Soil Water At Planting and Related Management
John Holman, K-State Extension Cropping Systems Agronomist
Augustine Obour, K-State Professor of Soil Science

February 24
Wheat Conditions & Breeding Efforts on Mosaic Viruses
Allen Fritz, K-State Wheat Breeder

March 3
Fungicide Applications in Corn and Sorghum
Rodrigo Onofre, K-State Extension Plant Pathologist

March 10
What's Bugging You? Insects to Watch for in the Field
Anthony Zukoff, K-State Entomologist

Register to attend at
www.bit.ly/KSUCropTalk

Scan me!

Links for joining will be sent after registration.
One Certified Crop Advisor (CCA) Credit per session has been applied for.

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If you have questions, please contact your local Extension agent or the K-State Northwest Research and Extension Center at 785-462-6281.

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