

Effects of Flooding on Corn Emergence

KEY POINTS

- Flooding in corn fields can negatively affect yield potential and cause other problems.
- Plant survival, potential nitrogen loss, and soil crusting should be considered when deciding on management options.
- Farmers may reseed poor stands with corn or soybeans if timely, soils are fit, and herbicide labels have allowable re-cropping intervals.

Survival of Corn Plants

Effects of flooding on yield potential depend on the growth stage of corn, length of time corn is submerged, and temperature. Corn plants need oxygen to survive, and oxygen is depleted after about 48 hours.^{1,2} Corn plants at or below the soil surface are at the highest risk of dying when the field is flooded. Submerged seedlings that are at or below the soil surface can survive for 2 to 4 days.² Emerged corn and corn with a growing point above water have a better chance of survival.

Temperature is one of the most critical components of plant survival while the field is flooded. If temperatures are above 77° F, the plant may not survive 24 hours beneath water.¹ If temperatures are cooler (<77° F), corn with fewer than six leaves can survive approximately four days of flooding.¹

Potential Flooding Problems

Significant loss of nitrogen (N) through denitrification or leaching can occur in corn fields submerged for more than two days. Saturated soils result in denitrification, which tends to be more prevalent in heavier-textured soils, whereas leaching is more prevalent in sandy soils. Soil moisture can increase N losses due to denitrification. Research conducted in Nebraska indicated approximately a 10 to 25 percent nitrate loss when soil is saturated for 5 and 10 days, respectively.³ This was reported while soil temperatures were between 55 and 60° F. Sidedressing more N is a possible solution if considerable N was lost in the field.

As wet soils dry, the soil surface can form a crust causing seedling emergence to be inhibited. Fields may be at greater risk for soil crusting if they -

- have fine textured soils,
- low organic matter,
- little surface residue, and
- excessive tillage.⁴

A rotary hoe can break up the crust and aid seedling emergence. Timing is essential, and breaking the crust as soon as possible is most beneficial. Without disease infection, cooler soils can allow seedlings to survive longer as they break through the crust.

Scouting and Replanting Options

It is important to scout corn fields 3 to 5 days after the water has receded.^{1,2} Pull up seedlings and look at the growing point. A white or cream-colored growing point that is still firm means the plant is recovering. Growing points that are darkening and soft are beginning to die.² Stand counts need to be taken to see if a desirable plant stand survived.

Several options are available if you need to replant a field. More geography and timing specific information on stand evaluation and replant decisions can be found from your local Extension service. If replanting with corn, minimum or no tillage is recommended to maintain efficacy of any herbicides and/or soil insecticides already applied to the field.

Switching to alternative crops when replanting corn fields must be carefully considered. Before replanting with soybeans, check your herbicide label and consult local experts to determine if the previously applied corn herbicides could damage the replanted crop. It is important to scout fields entirely before making the decision to replant.

Sources: ¹ Elmore, R., Daugherty, R.B., and Mueller, N. 2015. Corn and soybean survival in saturated and flooded soils. University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Cropwatch.unl.edu. ² Thomison, P. 2005. Ponding effects on corn. Corn Newsletter. Ohio State University Extension. ³ Ferguson, R.B. 2008. Assessing nitrogen loss due to saturated soils. University of Nebraska-Lincoln. ⁴ Al-Kaisi, M. and Pedersen, P. 2007. Wet conditions: challenges and opportunities. Iowa State University Extension. Integrated Crop Management. ICM>2007>IC-498(9). Web sources verified 1/19/18

Individual results may vary, and performance may vary from location to location and from year to year. This result may not be an indicator of results you may obtain as local growing, soil and weather conditions may vary. Growers should evaluate data from multiple locations and years whenever possible.

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Figure 1. Corn younger than 6-leaf growth stage can survive 4 days of flooding.¹