ECONOMICS OF IRRIGATION ENDING DATE FOR CORN: USING FIELD DEMONSTRATION RESULTS

Mahbub Alam,

Extension Irrigation Specialist, Kansas State University, SW Research-Extension Center, Garden City, KS. Phone: 620-275-9164, Fax: 620-276-6028. Email: malam@ksu.edu

Troy J. Dumler, Danny H. Rogers, and Kent Shaw

Extension Agricultural Economist, SW Research-Extension Center, Garden City, KS; Professor, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS; and Mobile Irrigation Lab Program coordinator, SWREC, Garden City, KS, respectively.

The results from a field study indicate that corn growers of western Kansas may cut back last one or two irrigation events of the season without appreciable loss in production. This will improve the economic return by reducing input cost from water. Recent increase in energy cost for pumping water has necessitated this study to compare the benefits of continuing irrigation until black layer formation. With the decline of Ogallala aquifer groundwater level and rising fuel cost, any reduction of pumping makes economic sense. The first irrigation ending date around August 10-15, corresponding to denting and starch layer formation of ¼ to ½ towards the germ layer resulted in an yield reduction of 17 bushels averaging for four years of data for a silty loam soil as compared to second ending date around August 21-22, which corresponded to starch layer at ½ to ¾ towards the germ layer. However, continuing irrigation until September 1, corresponding to the start of black layer formation, improved yield by only 2.5 bushels per acre. Economic sensitivity tests show that irrigating until the formation of starch layer at ½ to ¾ towards germ layer is feasible with a corn price of $2 per bushel and $8 per inch pumping costs. However, irrigating past this stage of grain development is not feasible even with $2.75 / bushel of corn and pumping costs as low as $4 / inch.

Introduction

Crop production in western Kansas is dependent on irrigation. The irrigation water source is groundwater from the Ogallala aquifer. The water level of the Ogallala aquifer is declining causing the depth of pumping to increase. The additional fuel consumption required for greater pumping depths and higher energy costs have resulted in higher pumping costs in recent years. Because of declining water levels and higher pumping costs, it is necessary to conserve water by adopting efficient water management practices. Irrigation scheduling is an important management tool. Farmers are interested in information on optimum timing for ending the irrigation season. There are some misconceptions regarding the optimum irrigation ending dates. Some farmers believe that the corn crop must continue to have water to avoid eardrop. Over application at the end of season based on this thought cause waste of water, increases cost of production, and may even cause degradation of quality of the grain due to high humidity or disease. Most of all, the excess use of water may reduce the useful life of the Ogallala aquifer which is a confined aquifer with little or no recharge. Depletion of the Ogallala aquifer will impact irrigated agriculture and the present economy of the area. The objective of the study was to determine the affect that irrigation ending date had on corn yield and economic return.

Procedures

A producer's center pivot sprinkler irrigated field was selected for the study. A silty loam soil of Ulysses series was selected and the study was conducted for four years (2000-2003). Two sets of six nozzles were shut progressively after the formation of starch layer in the corn grain. The first closure was done when the starch layer was ¼ to ½ to the germ. This corresponded to August 10th to 15th, depending on growing degree units. The second closure was done when the starch layer was ½ to ¾ to the corn germ. This corresponded to August 21 to 24. The third closure occurred when the producer ended irrigation for the year. This happened during the first week of September.

Four random plots of 30 ft. by 30 ft. were identified within the center pivot sprinkler circle over which the selected nozzles would pass during an irrigation event. Ridges were built around the plots to prevent entry of water from the adjacent areas. Gypsum block soil water sensors were buried in the plots at three different depths (1, 2, and 3 feet) below the soil surface. The soil of the test field is Ulysses silt loam series. It is relatively dark with a deep profile and good water holding capacity. The soil surface, however, cracks when dry.

Corn ears were hand harvested. Four contiguous rows measuring ten feet each were harvested at the middle of each plot to remove any border effect. Grain yields were adjusted to 15.5% moisture content.

In 2005, the study was moved to a field with loamy fine sand soil (Vona loamy fine sand series) to evaluate irrigation ending date for a light textured soil with lower water holding capacity. The hypothesis is that the sandy soil may require continuation of irrigation and irrigation ending date may be delayed compared to a silty loam soil with higher water holding capacity. The procedure followed was similar to the earlier study where two sets of six nozzles were closed progressively as the grain formed starch layer.

Results and Discussion

Continuation of irrigation from the first ending date in early August (August 10-15) to the second ending date in the beginning of the fourth week (August 21-22) gave an increase of average 19.5 bushels of grain per acre. The additional irrigation application amounted to 2.1 inches. The yield difference from the August 22 ending date to the first week of September ending date, as normally practiced, was only 2.5 bushels per acre on average for four years. The additional irrigation quantity for the period from the first ending to last irrigation date amounted to 4.6 inches (additional 2.1 inches from second ending date) as an average for four years. The yearly yields are shown in figure 1.

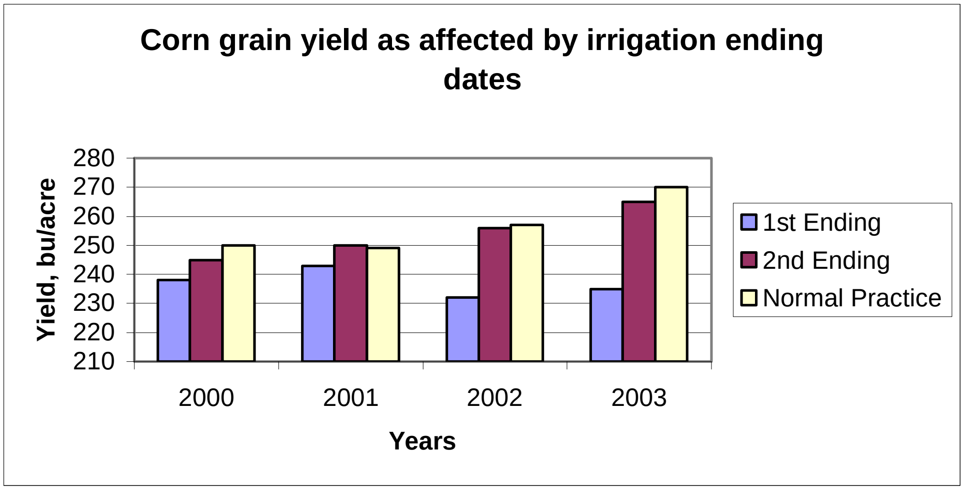

Figure 1: Yield of corn grain as affected by irrigation ending date at different growth stage on a silty loam soil, Stevens County, Kansas, 2000 -2003.

The tool used to determine the optimum irrigation ending date was the marginal value vs. marginal cost analysis. In this analysis corn price ranged from $2.00 to $2.75 per bushel, while pumping cost ranged from $3.00 to $8.00 per inch. Positive returns indicate that the marginal benefit of continuing irrigation was greater than the cost of applying water.

Figure 2 shows that under nearly all scenarios, irrigation remains profitable until the second ending date. However, irrigation past this growth stage may not be profitable (Figure 3). Return becomes negative at pumping cost of $4.00 per inch for corn even at $2.75.

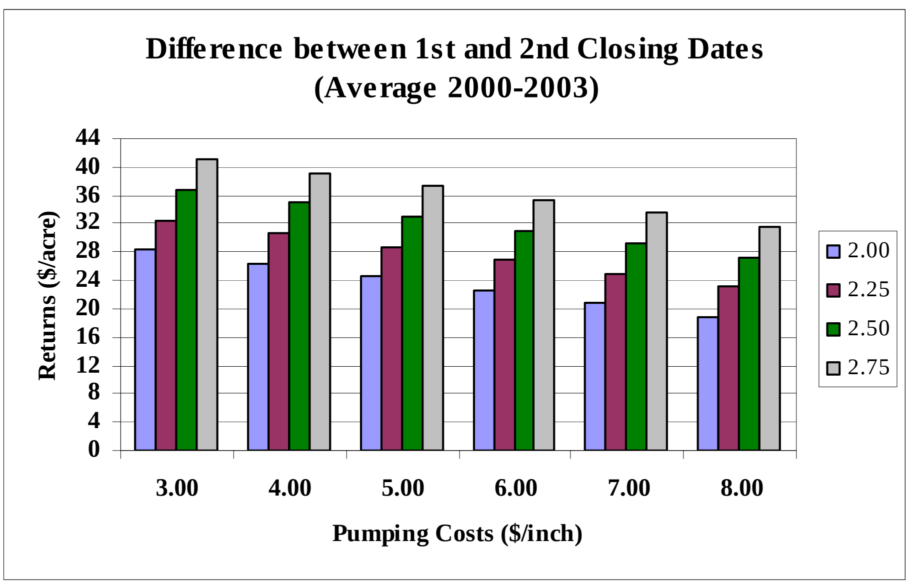

Figure 2: Returns at different levels of input cost and price of corn for difference between 1st and 2nd ending dates

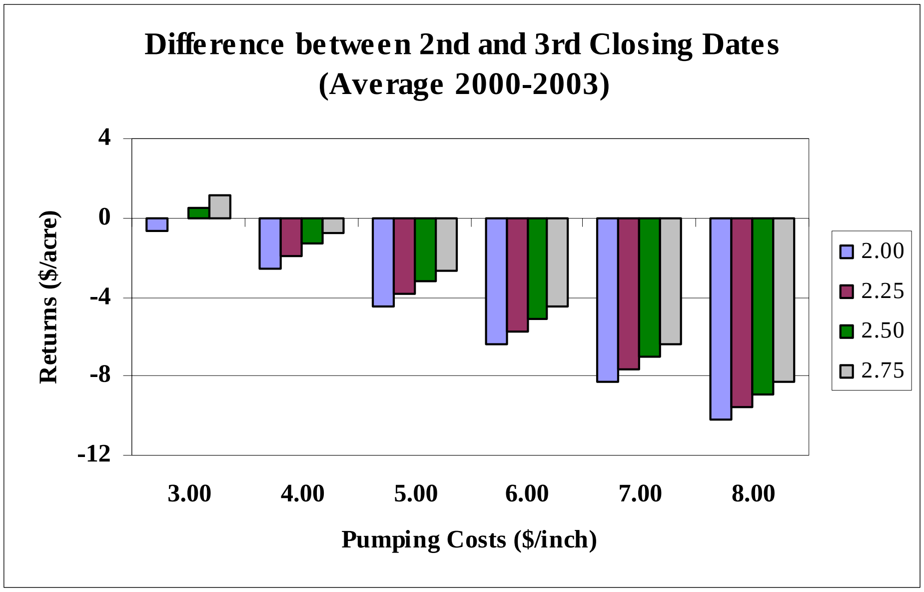

Figure 3: Returns at different levels of input cost and price of corn for difference between 2nd and 3rd ending dates

Kansas State University water management bulletin No. MF-2174 presents a table showing normal water requirements for corn between stages of growth and maturity. Corn grain, at full dent, will use 2.5 inches of water for the remaining 13 days before reaching physiological maturity.

The available water holding capacity of the soil in the study field is estimated to be approximately six inches or more per 3 feet of root zone. It is expected that at a 50 percent management allowable depletion level this soil will provide about 3 inches of water. This may be the reason that there was no appreciable benefit from continuing irrigation past August 21 or after the starch layer has moved past ½ to ¾ towards germ layer. The soil water sensors indicated that the soil water condition was adequate to carry the crop to full maturity. Soil water status monitored by gypsum block sensors is presented in Figure 4-6.

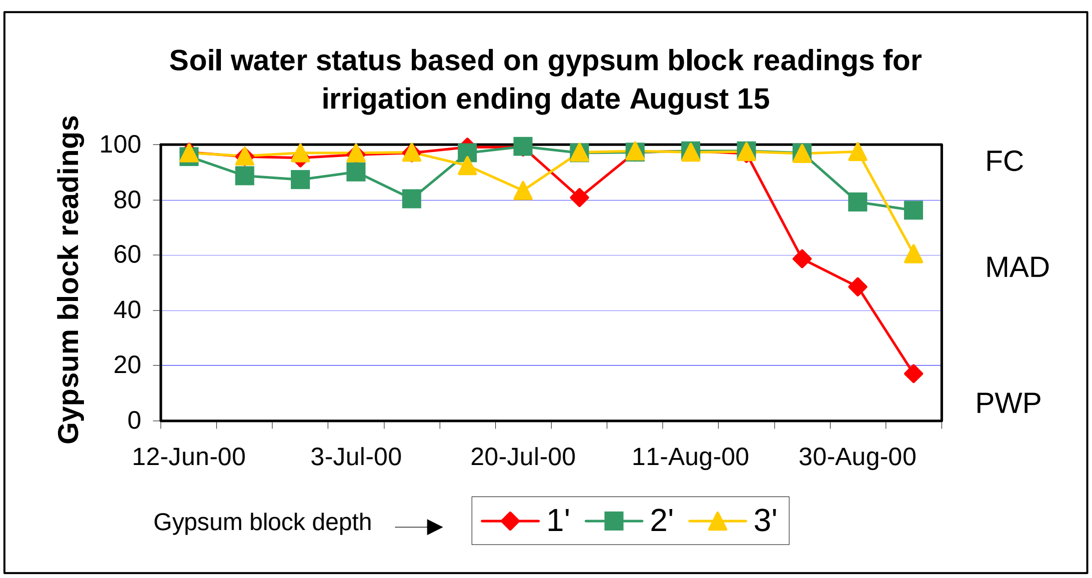

Figure 4: Soil water status for 1st irrigation ending date. (FC=field capacity, 100% available water holding capacity or AWHC, MAD=management allowable depletion, 50% AWHC, PWP=permanent wilting point, 0% AWHC)

Figure 4 shows that the soil water at first and third feet depths were falling below Management Allowable Depletion (MAD) level for the first ending date that caused reduction in yield. Figure 5 shows that soil water in first foot started to go down in the plots of second ending date, but there was enough in second and third foot to carry the crop to maturity. It is also seen that at this site for some reason the moisture level at 1-2' feet were at MAD level in the very beginning of the season. However, this changed as irrigation started.

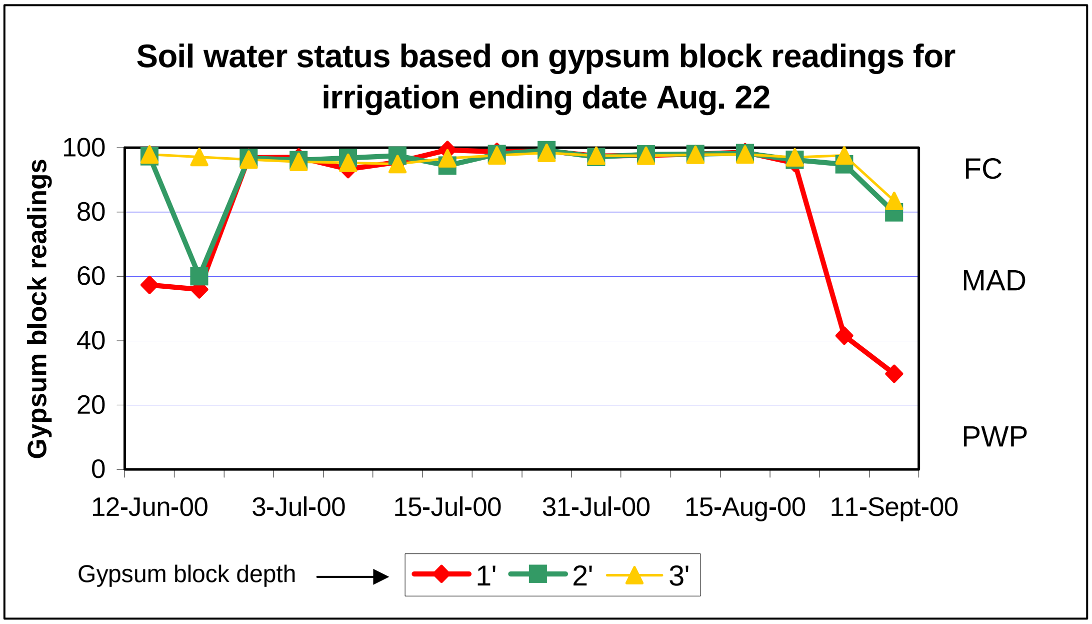

Figure 5: Soil water status for 2nd irrigation ending date. (FC = Field Capacity, MAD = Management Allowable Depletion, and PWP = Permanent Wilting Point)

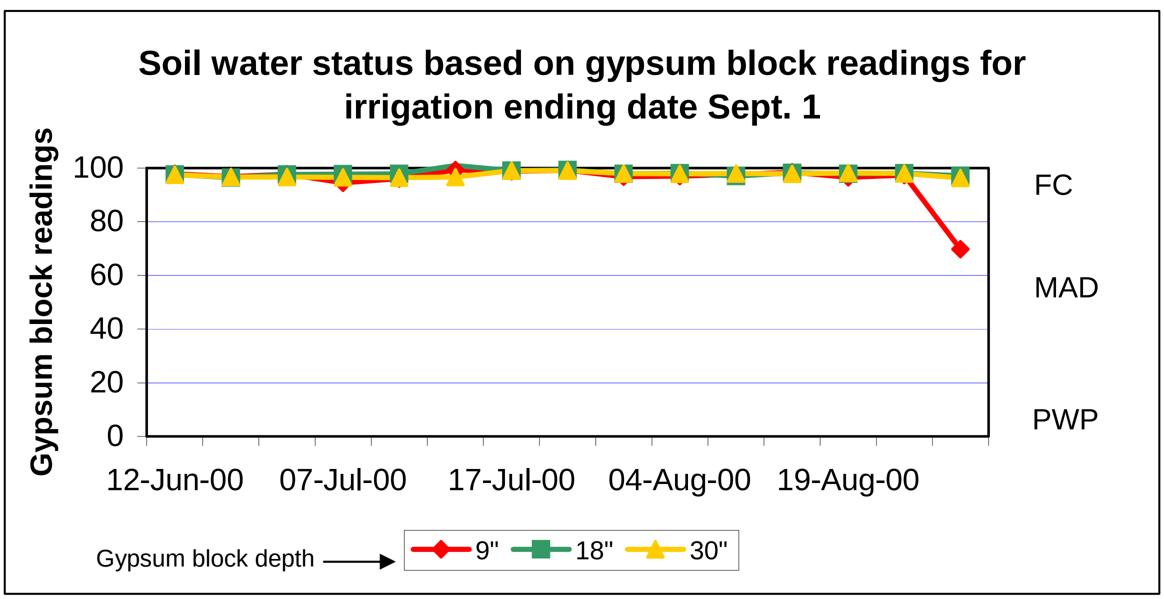

Figure 6: Soil water status on 3rd irrigation ending date. (FC = Field Capacity, MAD = Management Allowable Depletion, and PWP = Permanent Wilting Point)

Figure 6 shows soil water readings taken until September 11 at the area where irrigation continued until September 1 under producers practices, indicate that soil water was almost at Field Capacity, except for the first foot of the profile. The crop was already mature and there was no more water use. The profile was left with high water content over the winter. Most of the irrigated cornfields in western Kansas reflect this situation and have little room to store winter and early spring precipitation. This causes double loss from not taking advantage of natural precipitation and leaching of nutrient with the deep percolation of excess water. A three-year study by Rogers and Lamm (1994) also indicated that the irrigation practices of corn producers of western Kansas leave approximately 1.4 inches of available soil water per foot of soil profile.

Irrigated agricultural producers are continuously being educated on irrigation scheduling. Kansas State University Biological and Agricultural Engineering developed computer software called KanSched to provide the producers with an easy to use tool for irrigation scheduling. The irrigation events, rainfall, and crop water use (Evapotranspiration) data were entered to track soil water depletion pattern, which is presented in Figure 8. Tracking of crop water use and irrigation application show that the soil profile was pretty full at the end of the season when irrigation was continued until September 1.

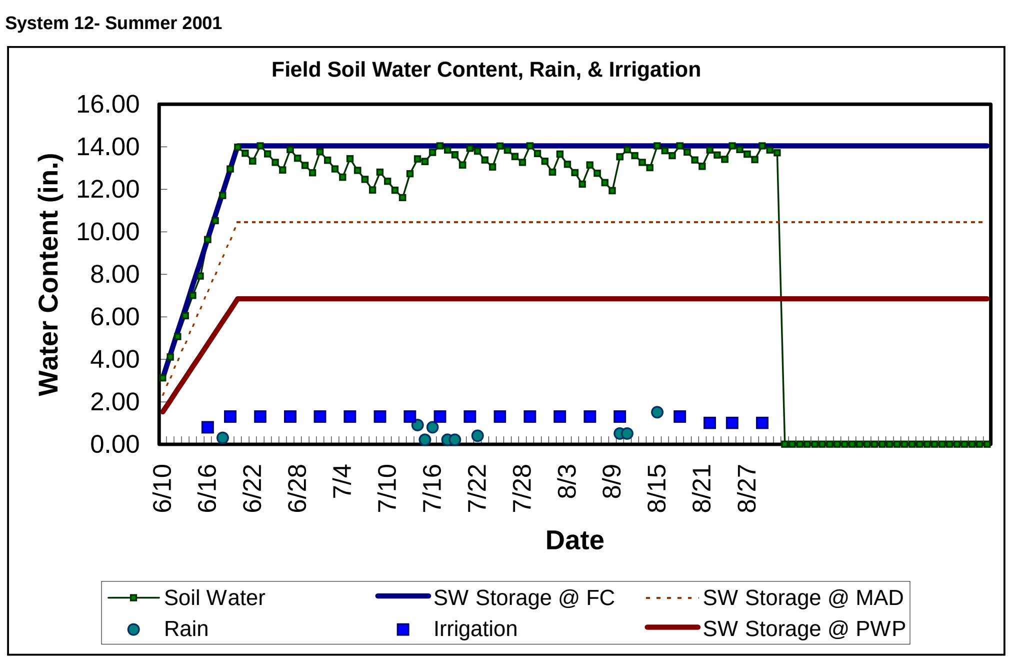

Figure 7: Chart showing water balance between soil water storage at field capacity and permanent wilting point. The dashed line in the middle represents management allowable depletion.

It would be worthwhile to mention that there was no appreciable eardrop observed in the field within the circular area with the first irrigation ending. However, the plants were dryer as compared to the rest of the field at the time of harvest.

Results of 2005 trial on Vona loamy fine sand needs to be continued to establish a trend. However, the first year results do indicate that the return remains in the positive at pumping cost of $5.00 per inch although the rate of return has been greatly reduced, Figure 9-10.

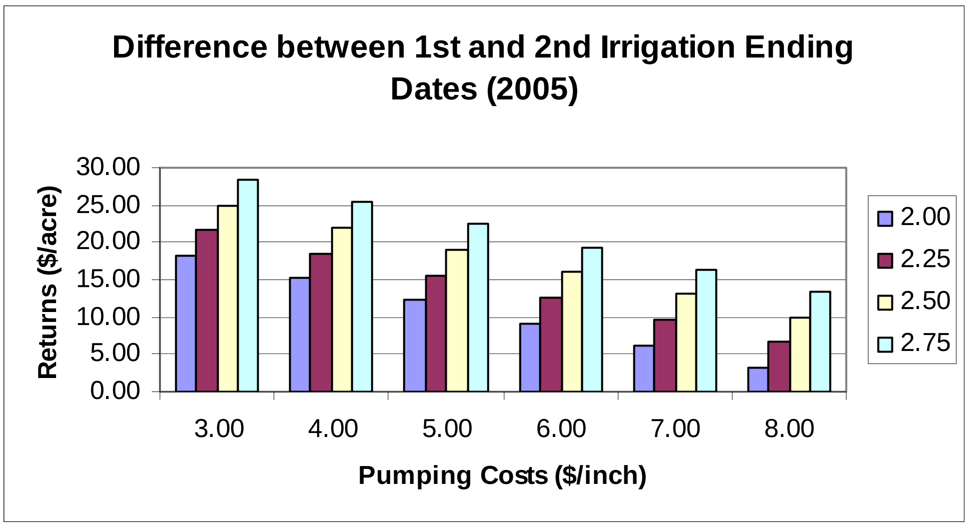

Figure 8: Returns at different levels of input cost and price of corn for difference between 1st and 2nd ending dates.

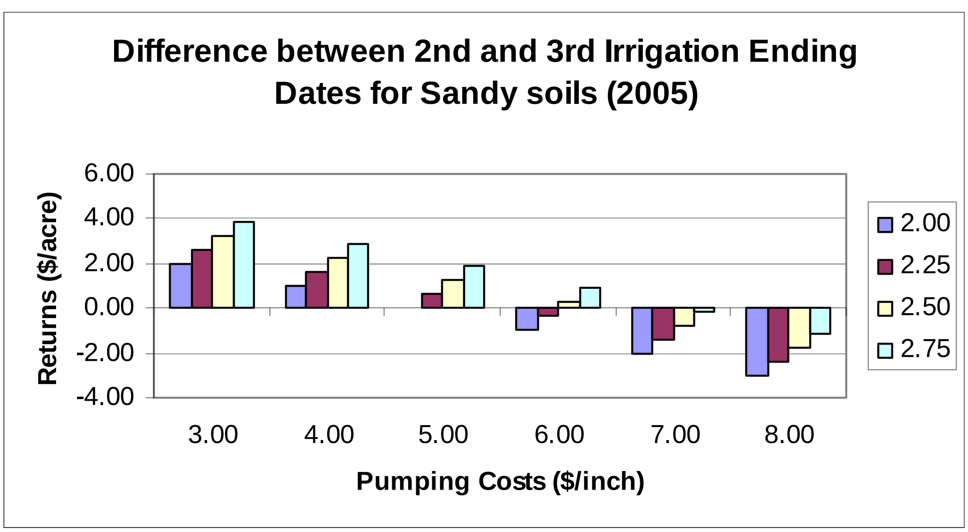

Figure 9: Returns at different levels of input cost and price of corn for difference between 2nd and 3rd ending dates

Conclusion

A four-year field study indicates that the present practice of irrigating until the formation of black layer in corn grain may not be economical. An earlier ending date for irrigation corresponding to the starch layer at ½ to ¾ of the grain may help improve the economic return and best utilize the soil profile water in a silt loam soil. Using KanSched or Soil water monitoring by other means may help in the decision process. However, this may require more cautious evaluation in a sandy soil for its low water holding capacity.

Acknowledgements

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