



Armor for Your Seed: Are Spring Cereal Seed Treatments Worth the Price?

Seed treatments can feel like a “tax” on every unit of seed—until you’ve watched a stand get thinned by cold soils, seedling disease, or wireworms. Then they feel cheap.

The truth is in the middle:

Seed treatments are usually worth it when they prevent stand loss or early stress that you can’t fix later. They’re not worth it when they’re mismatched to your actual risk (or applied poorly).

This post breaks down what seed treatments do, the real pros and cons, and a simple way to decide if treated seed is worth the price on your spring wheat or spring barley acres.

1) What is a seed treatment (in plain terms)?

A seed treatment is a small amount of chemistry applied directly to the seed—usually a fungicide, sometimes an insecticide, and occasionally biologicals or micronutrients depending on the product.

The goal is simple: protect the seed and seedling during the most vulnerable window—from planting through emergence and early establishment.

In the Pacific Northwest, small-grain disease guidance states that all small grain seed planted in the region should be treated with a seed protectant to control bunts/smuts and fungi that cause seedling damping-off. [1] That’s not marketing—those pathogens are still here, and many varieties are susceptible. [1]

2) The biggest PROS (why treated seed often pays)

Pro #1 — Protects your stand when conditions are tough

Cool soils, variable moisture, residue, crusting risk—these are the exact conditions where seedling diseases can steal plants before you ever see the problem.

PNW guidance lists seed treatments as a key tool to reduce losses from:

- common bunt, dwarf bunt, flag smut, loose smut

- seedling damping-off and early seed/seedling rots [1]

Stand establishment is profit. You can't "fertilize back" missing plants.

Pro #2 — Controls smuts/bunts that are hard to fix later

Smut and bunt diseases often show up at heading, long after the damage is locked in. Many extension sources emphasize that modern smut problems are largely controlled through certified seed and systemic seed treatments. [2]

If you've ever smelled "stinking smut," you already know the value: it can turn a clean crop into a dockage headache.

Pro #3 — Helps manage wireworms and early-season insect feeding (where risk is real)

In some fields, stand loss is insects—not disease.

University of Idaho IPM notes that wireworms feeding on germinating seeds and seedlings can reduce seed viability, weaken stands, and reduce seedling vigor, and that feeding injury can also open the door to secondary infections. [3]

When wireworm risk is high (field history, grassy weeds, pasture/sod rotations), insecticide seed treatments can reduce early feeding injury as part of an integrated plan. [1][3]

3) The biggest CONS (what seed treatments can't do)

Con #1 — They don't fix bad planting

Seed treatments can't overcome sidewall compaction and smear, seed placed too deep or inconsistently, planting into cold mud, or poor seed-to-soil contact. You still have to "plant it right."

Con #2 — They can be oversold as broad-spectrum insurance

Most treatments are strongest early and closest to the seed zone. They're not a season-long disease program.

PNW guidance also cautions that seed can be damaged mechanically, physiologically, or chemically—including issues tied to excessive or uneven seed treatment application. [1]

Con #3 — Cost adds up when risk is low

If you're planting into warm, fit conditions with low disease pressure and no insect history, the return can be smaller. In those cases, the "worth it" decision often hinges on your stand tolerance, seed cost, and how expensive a replant or thin stand would be.

4) So... are seed treatments worth the price?

Seed treatments are usually worth it when:

- you expect slow emergence (cool soils, early planting, heavy residue)
- your farm has a history of smuts/bunts or seedling disease
- you're planting into a field with wireworm risk
- your economics require an ideal stand (high yield goal, irrigated management, high seed cost)

These are the exact situations highlighted in PNW small grains disease guidance and UI wireworm risk context. [1][3]

They're often less worth it when:

- soil temps are warm and emergence is quick
- field history shows low disease/insect issues
- you're willing to accept some stand loss and still meet yield goals

That said, "low risk" years can turn into high risk quickly if planting conditions change.

5) What's actually in a "typical" spring cereal seed treatment?

Not all treatments are the same. Many are packages.

PNW guidance lists common active ingredients used in the region for smut control and seed/seedling disease suppression, including systemic smut-control fungicides (examples given include difenoconazole, prothioconazole, tebuconazole, triticonazole) and other actives used for damping-off/root rot suppression (examples listed include metalaxyl/mefenoxam, fludioxonil, thiram, imazalil). [1]

It also notes that insecticide seed treatments are often included as mixtures and that certain insecticides can reduce damage from wireworms and aphids (including those that transmit barley yellow dwarf virus). [1]

Takeaway: the "right" treatment depends on the target—smut/bunt protection, damping-off/seed rot protection, insect protection (wireworms/early pests), or a combination.

6) A practical decision checklist (fast and honest)

Step 1 — What's your stand worth?

If you lose 10–20% stand, do you still hit your yield goal? If not, treated seed is usually a good investment.

Step 2 — What are your field risks?

Check the boxes that apply:

- Early planting / cool soils likely
- Heavy residue or no-till / slower warm-up
- Field history of smut/bunt
- Field has wireworm history or is coming out of grass/pasture
- You need an ideal stand (irrigated, high yield goal, high input)

If you check two or more, treatment usually pencils well. This aligns with the risk conditions emphasized in regional guidance and UI wireworm damage descriptions. [1][3]

Step 3 — Make sure the treatment matches the risk

- Smut/bunt history → prioritize smut/bunt actives
- Cool/wet emergence risk → prioritize damping-off/root rot suppression
- Wireworm risk → consider insecticide component + monitoring plan [3]

7) What we do on a Western Seeds field walk

Seed treatment decisions are best when they're field-specific. During a field walk, we'll help you identify disease and insect risk patterns (rotation, residue, soil type), evaluate planting conditions and emergence risk, and avoid avoidable problems (depth, seedbed "fit," calibration).

Schedule a field walk

If you're deciding whether treated seed is worth it—let's walk the field.

Reach out to Western Seeds to schedule a field walk. We'll help you assess risk, and build a planting plan that protects your stand and your margin.

Reference List

[1] Smiley, R., Paulitz, T., & Marshall, J. Controlling Root and Crown Diseases of Small Grain Cereals (PNW 639). (Seed protectant recommendation; bunts/smuts/seedling damping-off; common actives; notes on insecticide seed treatments and early pest protection.)

[2] Cornell CALS Field Crops. Smut and Bunt Diseases (Small Grains). (Overview; notes that smut diseases have largely been controlled through certified seed and systemic seed treatments.)

[3] University of Idaho Extension IPM. Wireworms. (Wireworm damage to germinating seeds/seedlings; stand loss risk context for monitoring/management.)

***concept by Trenton Stanger, developed with the help of ChatGPT