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Fall Newsletter 2020

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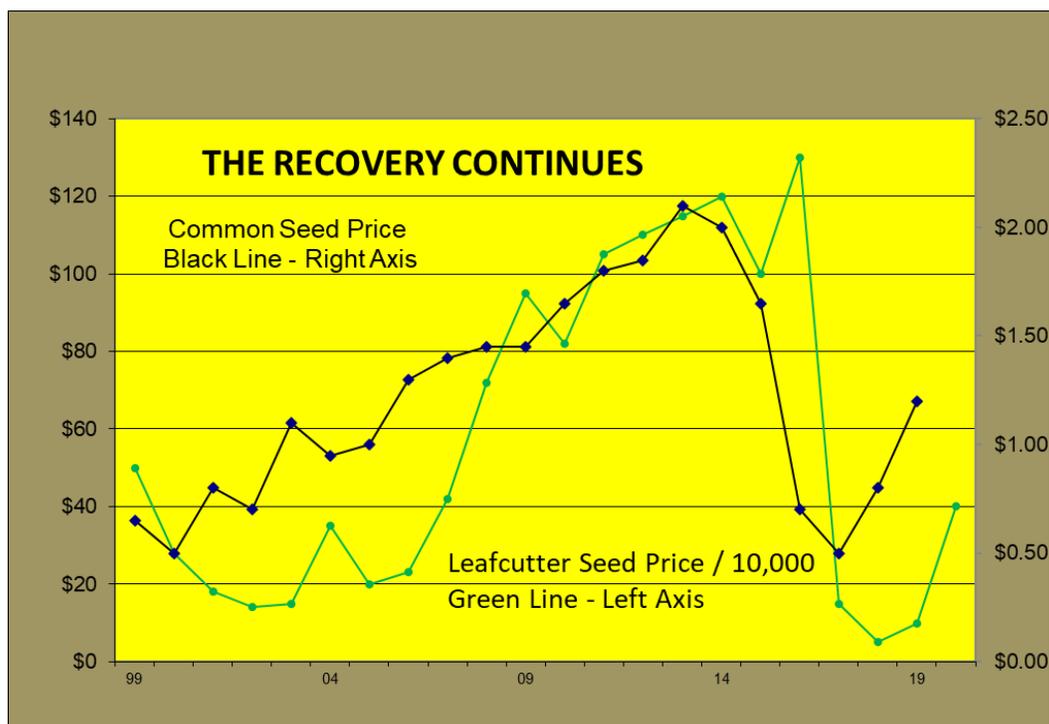
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FINALLY, FIVE YEARS LATER



ALFALFA SEED USAGE:

Over the last 6 months, there has been significant quantities of lower priced alfalfa seed moved off shore, and planted in Canada and the USA. Most of the alfalfa seed in farmer's bins has moved to market. Much of the inventory held by smaller seed companies in Canada has found a home. So much of the seed surplus in Canada has been planted.

BUT: There is still a surplus of "Old" or "Outdated" varieties in the hands of larger USA seed companies. This will keep a lid on prices for the coming year.

2020 ALFALFA SEED CROP:

USA: Good to above average crop on reduced acres. This production is mostly alfalfa varieties with new traits that are in demand. But the acres producing seed are much lower than five years ago.

ALBERTA: Good average production of 450 to 500 pounds expected here. There are still lots of acres here, seed production is fairly reliable, and the grower price is much lower than in the USA. Crop Insurance may still play a role here as well. This is Canada's big producer and most of that seed goes to the USA.

SASKATCHEWAN & MANITOBA ALFALFA SEED PRODUCTION

Our current guess is that acres of common alfalfa seed are only down slightly in Saskatchewan and Manitoba. Seed and bee prices are low, but the main commodity crops aren't big money makers either. Many of alfalfa seed growers are committed to a certain level of leafcutter bee production, so they are prepared to wait out the low prices. By staying in the game, we all contribute to keeping prices low and a longer market recovery.

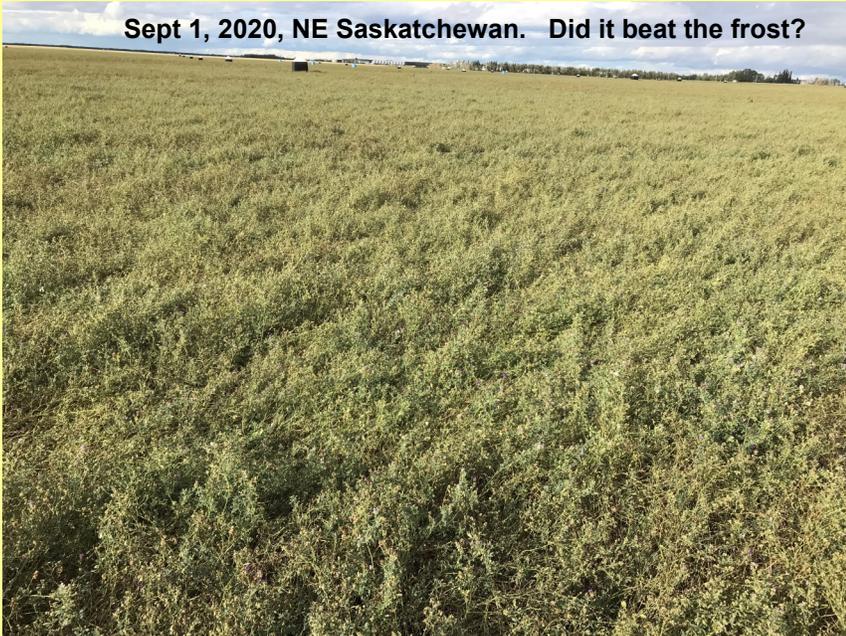
The big question is what will this crop yield? Atwater was in a major drought area. Pollination was early and the fields matured early. We were harvesting alfalfa seed in August. Yields varied a lot across each field. The salinity and sand patches killed the average. But each field had some areas that showed what alfalfa seed can yield when the stars line up. That keeps us in it.



This part of this field ran 1,000 lbs/acre and is in the bin

In our experience, plump green seed with a bright green color is still alive. After a frost, the pod turns a bit duller color, and the seed turns a watery green, then a dull green, as it dries.

Sept 1, 2020, NE Saskatchewan. Did it beat the frost?



This picture was taken in NE Saskatchewan about September 1st. Lots of growth from all the rain. The hot August stopped any disease, and there is lots of late pollination. But can it beat the frost? There has been wide spread frost, and while the plants look 100% fine, the seed has been hurt. It takes -8C to tune in the alfalfa plant, but the seed is hurt at -1C.

We have always tried to harvest our other crops as they mature, and leave the alfalfa to the end. This year the alfalfa and canola were ready at the same time. We chose the alfalfa as it was the most valuable crop. During harvest we suffered thru a couple of wicked winds. They broke pods off the standing alfalfa and seriously reorganized the canola swaths. In the end, we felt that taking the alfalfa as soon as it is ready was the best choice.

We expect the frost and wind has taken a significant portion of Saskatchewan's alfalfa seed crop. This alfalfa seed crop will be less than last year, with yields between 100 and 350 lbs/acre.

There will be a lot less common seed coming to market this year, than we saw the last four years. The low prices may have generated a demand for more low priced seed than is available. USA corn and beans are less profitable, plus there is a move back to reaping the soil benefits that come from raising alfalfa hay. All of this will help support stronger common alfalfa seed prices.

WORMS AND BUGS:

CUTWORMS:

We all know cutworms can be pretty hard on newly established alfalfa. But can cutworms damage established fields? Absolutely they can. In the spring of 2019 we managed to get an excellent burn on five quarters of 2nd year alfalfa seed fields. That was great. Two quarters emerged and looked terrific, but three quarters were very slow and patchy to emerge. At first we thought it was just setback from the fire. But Craig discovered there were so many cutworms, that they were eating the established alfalfa plants before they emerged from the ground.



You would just brush the burnt ground and the cutworms rolled out. The few plants that made it above ground were chewed and stunted.

Even more unbelievable, in 2020 Craig had a 3rd year established field that looked like cows (or deer) were grazing on it. The tops of the plants, buds and leaves, were beaten and chewed. It turned out that at night, the cutworms climbed the plants and ate the tops. Who would have thought that cutworms could graze the top of an established seed field?

In both cases, Lorsban at night fixed the problem.



Taken at 11:00 PM, the cutworms are right to the top of the plants

ALFALFA WEEVILS:

These guys have extended their range to the entire province. They will defoliate the plants if you get up into 20—30 worms per sweep. This is serious damage



GRASSHOPPERS:

Look Close—its hiding there. You can see only stems left in the background. Something has eaten everything but the stem. And that stem gets ate next.

Dry weather and light land means grasshoppers. They will clip the pods off the alfalfa prior to harvest.

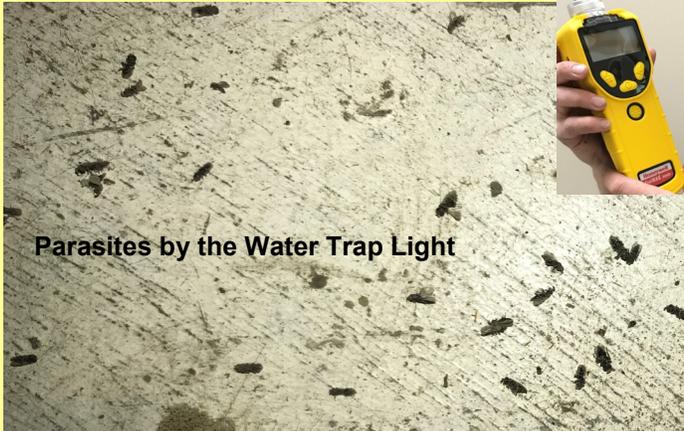
In newly planted fields they attack in July and August. They can completely defoliate small plants.



THE HIGH COST OF RESEARCH

PARASITES, VAPONA, & MINIRAE:

Last spring we purchased a Minirae 3000+, which we thought was capable of measuring levels of Vapona (dichlorvos) in our incubators. The plan was to see if different sticks of dichlorvos, with different lot numbers, released varying amounts of dichlorvos. We also wanted to measure the level of dichlorvos in different incubators, and in different locations in the incubators. It was a great scientific plan and we put lots of work and money into it. Plus the Minirae was close to \$7,000 Cdn.



Parasites by the Water Trap Light

It was a complete BUST! It was like checking your oil pressure by reading your speedometer. It turned out the meter was not capable of accurately detecting dichlorvos at the levels typically in leafcutter bee incubators. That was verified by the technical people at RaeSystems. Anyone need a slightly used meter?

THE NEXT BIG THING - GO SLOWLY

The photo below shows the next big thing in cockle control—sprayed on the right. Those plants appear fine, just not flowering like the ones on the left. But the proof is in the harvest. The area we didn't spray had double the yield of the treated area. It doesn't help to control the weeds, if the seed yield is half.



THINGS THAT DO WORK:

SPRING BURNING:

We hate to do it. Last spring we got an excellent burn on a couple of fields, then had to endure a bit of soil erosion. But it does an excellent job on alfalfa weevils, plant bugs, winter annuals, and plant disease. And the pain of burning is forgotten when the alfalfa seed is pouring in the hopper.

AUTHORITY & VALTERA:

Valtera provides good volunteer canola control. Authority was first used on our farm for kochia control, but soon became the #1 solution to both kochia and cleavers. It continues to give many growers great results. In the hope of holding off weed resistance to these products, they are only used on alfalfa.

PARDNER ON A HOT DAY IN JULY:

This is a great tool for reducing the seed yield of Canada thistle, sweet clover, and many other weeds. We had a field this year with enough problems to justify this treatment. It was DRY and it was HOT when we did it. Amazing results. This kochia plant was growing in a saline area. A major setback to the weeds, with little or no effect the alfalfa seed yield.



FUNGICIDES:

We had between 3" and 4.5" of rain from April to August, with lots of hot, windy days. The fungicides we applied to our wheat and canola had no effect on yield. But even in this super dry year, there was a slight yield bump of about 10% from the July 15th application on 2nd and 3rd year alfalfa seed yields. It isn't significant on a dry year, but we find on our land it really makes a difference in normal or wet years.

CHECK STRIPS:

Always, Always, leave a check strip. Except maybe a "no seed" check strip, which these sectional control seeders think should be left by the grid road. It's the only way to see how much good, and how much damage you're doing. And Ag companies hate them.

TERMINATING ALFALFA STANDS:

This isn't alfalfa seeded into canola, this is canola seeded into an alfalfa field that had been killed—we thought. What did we do to kill the alfalfa?

Canola Seeded into an Old Alfalfa Stand



Last fall it had 3L of glyphosate, but it was dry and wasn't growing really well. But by late fall it was completely brown with no sign of life.

This spring the rows emerged again, so another 1L of glyphosate before the canola emerged. That set the alfalfa back, but it started growing again. Lontrel was next, followed by Liberty, followed by another shot of Liberty. In a wet year, the chemicals have more effect on the alfalfa, and the canola grows more vigorously. We have had wet years where canola on alfalfa stubble out yielded canola on wheat stubble. But not in dry years. What are some additional options?

- In addition to the glyphosate, do some fall tillage. That will encourage some winter kill
- Try some dicamba or 24D in late fall. The thought is that 24D stimulates bud release on the alfalfa, which breaks fall dormancy and causes winter kill. The concern here is chemical residue when the field is being planted to canola.
- Change the rotation to wheat following alfalfa, to allow use of these more effective chemicals.

From all the research we did, checking research publications, calling "experts" in Canada and the USA, and talking with alfalfa growers, there was one conclusion:

ALFALFA CAN BE REALLY HARD TO KILL

POCKET GOPHERS (MOLES):

These rodents are well up the list of reasons to terminate an alfalfa stand. Their mounds cause knife damage, rough fields, stand thinning and dirt in the crop. Our Gopher General machine has been well received, with machines working in ten different states in the USA. These are all owned by multi-cut, irrigated, hay producers, and so far, so good.

www.gophergeneral.com

THOSE ROTARY COMBINES:

Rotary combines bring a new level of difficulty to harvesting alfalfa seed. They aren't good at threshing, they don't like green material, they have trouble separating seed from hay in the rotor. You can have losses of 10% - 20% out the combine, especially under green conditions. The newer red ones have an air system that is not geared toward separating fine seed. The solutions are:

- Keep old conventional combines just to harvest alfalfa seed. This has the bonus of allowing alfalfa harvest and other crop harvest to proceed at the same time. But you need labor, more inside combine storage and mechanical skills to keep all this running. Lots of you have taken this road.
- Buy a new or newer conventional cylinder thresh combine. This is a good solution if you like the combine on other crops, and if you can get the parts, service, dependability, and resale value you need.
- Beat your head against the wall, buy a rotary and try to make it work on alfalfa seed. This has been our approach, and our heads are pretty scarred up from all the beating.



This year we have new Case/IH 8250s. Using special concaves, pre-cleaners, and sieves, we able to run 3.5 mph to 5 mph, while cutting 35' of 500 lb to 900 lb seed, with total loss of 1% or less out the back. All our research, time and expense finally paid off.

BEE MARKET AND PRICE OUTLOOK:

Last year was another bust for leafcutter bees sales, but there were a lot of bees sold at \$10 to \$20. Suddenly, at the end of the year, prices moved up towards \$50 in order to get some bees. July 2020 made for a difficult and late bee release for many. We think the overall 2020 bee crop was not as good as last year, in spite of a hot August. So there is hope for better prices, but often this is about who blinks first.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Alfalfa Seed: From January until now, we have seen a continued demand for common alfalfa seed at slowly rising prices. Much of this inexpensive alfalfa seed has been moved into the market place and planted in the ground. The surplus, on farm and in warehouses, is not as large as it was. Still a significant portion of the more expensive proprietary alfalfa seed in the USA remains. As this seed begins to deteriorate and lose germination it is coming on the market at below cost. It will act as a break on any dramatic rise in common alfalfa seed prices. We plan to start buying common seed at:

\$1.25 PER POUND, SUBJECT TO CHANGES IN THE MARKET

Bees: USA alfalfa seed growers, Alberta hybrid canola pollinators, blueberry growers, and Canadian alfalfa seed expanding acres all consume leafcutter bees. Prices below \$50 work for all these groups, but they will buy extra bees when prices are \$20. If the bee crop really is less, and the demand remains the same or increases, then prices will rise.

THINK \$30 TO \$50, AND MAYBE IT WILL HAPPEN

The last day of our 2020 Harvest - Bringing out the old combines for some fun and relaxation.



Please Send Us a 1 kg sample of any alfalfa seed you have for sale
We will do a detailed dockage test and give you a quote for dockage and price

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