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# Pask Farms Ltd. Spring Newsletter 2016

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## What Happened To The **Common Alfalfa Seed Market?**

Back in August, it looked like the 2015 common alfalfa seed crop was going to be sold at the price of a lifetime. Seed warehouses were empty, the CAD/US exchange rate was 1.30, and yields looked far from remarkable on the prairies. We made some early sales that netted a few growers \$2.50/lb for common seed FOB the grower's yard. Then news broke out that South Dakota was harvesting a record breaking alfalfa seed catch crop. Those not familiar with a South Dakota catch crop, it is when the farmers do not take a 2nd cut on their alfalfa hay fields. Rather they opt to leave them stand and gamble on a potential seed crop from wild pollinators. That is right, no leafcutters or honey bees. All the stars lined up and they harvested a gigantic seed crop. From the usual 1-2 million pound crop came an estimated 7-10 million pound crop of common seed. The quality is typically less than perfect, but none the less it made a huge difference in the way the market has played out. \$2.50/lb seed has dropped to \$1.80/lb, with most seed buyers shying away from purchasing much common at all.

More acres + Average yields = Too much seed??? (only time will tell)



seed yields in 2015 were better than the 2014 crop. MB and SK still had their troubles, mostly from too much rain later in the growing season. In spite of the usual hail storms, AB had an average crop. The US Pacific Northwest had a pretty ordinary year for production, up from their disappointing 2014 crop year. Acres producing alfalfa seed in North America increased in 2015, and are predicted to be up again in 2016. The fear of TOO MUCH SEED is worrisome for the 2016 common alfalfa seed crop. Quality and Improved Traits will be KING this fall.

## **Pask Farms Contract Production:**

For the 2015 crop, contract production was the winner. A few early common sellers got some decent money out of their common seed, but about \$2.00 per pound was a good average. At this point it is totally a buyer's market, with offers to growers below \$1.80 per pound. Those of you who had seed with known traits, or of a known variety, did a bit better if you sold early.

We are in the process of preparing our final payments on all Certified and VNS production contracts. Settlements and cheques will be in your hands by the middle of April. It looks like most contracts should pay the growers a net after all deductions of about \$2.20 per pound—**but there is more!** 

Where it was possible, the last few years we made a price adjustment bonus on the final payments, and this year we plan to do the same. The strength of the alfalfa seed market early on and a very positive CAD/US exchange rate allowed us to lock in a favourable margin. Any extra profit is being passed on to our contract grower base. Our plan is to bonus the final contract price even more, so we can put about **\$2.35/lb net in your pocket**.

When some lots are cleaned, we end up with seed too good for screenings, but so poor it cannot go back into the main lot. We run this through again, salvaging all the seed we can. It's costly to process, but does recover some value. If we were able to reclaim any seed for you, it will be included on the final payment @ \$1.75/lb.

We are seeing a rise in interest in contract production. The freedom and flexibility from growing common (non-contract) seed is losing ground to producers who want the security that comes from a contract. As more acres are planted for alfalfa seed production in Western Canada, the fear of overproducing increases. Growers want to know they can move their seed in a reasonable time frame, be assured of a minimum price, and most importantly get paid.

## Leafcutter Bee Market

Additional alfalfa seed acres in 2015 should have led to potentially more leafcutter bees being produced across the prairies. Bee re-production looked to be average across the three provinces. With more production, slumping alfalfa demand, and most importantly a declining price last spring, bee sellers were concerned about lower bee prices for their 2015 bee crop. Most producers sold loose cell between \$80 and \$90 FOB their yard. Hard to believe, but since the US bee meeting in January the bee price has steadily increased, with some receiving \$105 per gallon. Leafcutters are sold out, to the point that it is now limiting the US acres of spring plant alfalfa that will go in the ground. With more bees produced the selling price has still remained strong. A few factors that played a part in keeping the price up are;



Extra bees were kept in Canada to pollinate the expanding alfalfa seed acreage. This will hurt us moving ahead.

The growers using leafcutters for Alberta's hybrid canola industry were buyers of bees this year.

More bees went to Eastern Canada to pollinate blueberries.

Regions of California were buyers again.

Increased Canadian alfalfa seed acres x Two fold bee increase = Too many bees in 2016???

If the weather forecasters are right and we get a hot dry summer, \$100 bees may not be in the cards. Maybe we will get surprised again, let's hope so.

## **Disease Control in Alfalfa Seed Production:**

Plant disease just kills our yields in wet years. There are basically three control strategies.

**1. Spring burning:** Always gives the best results. Everyone knows the advantages and disadvantages of spring burning.

**2. Break Down The Stubble:** Munch last year's stand to reduce infection of the new growth from the old standing stubble. We've tried heavy harrowing and vertical tillage using a Salford 2100 RTS.

We measured yield, comparing burning vs. 1 pass of vertical tillage (VT) vs. two passSpring Burning is Always #1. Just keep the fire between the fences and the smoke away from the neighbors



es of VT. One trip with the Salford was better than nothing, and two trips was even better. **But not as good as burning.** Keep in mind that this is one year repeated on a number of fields. The data is too sketchy to give firm payback numbers showing the increased yield vs. the cost of vertical tillage. Burning the older stands followed by one pass with the Salford did well. The burning cleans up all the trash and insects and the vertical tillage levels any ruts and exposes any insect cocoons that were below the surface when the fire burnt. By exposing the insect cocoons to the surface, they might dry out and die. The wide wavy disks on the VT machine chewed things up, and smoothed the sprayer ruts out better than the heavy harrows. The rolling baskets

pushed all the little stones back in the ground. The good news was we never hurt the stand. Our plan for spring is to use the Salford for fire guard on well established first year fields. Older fields that get burnt will get one pass with the Salford. Unburnt fields will get two passes. We hope/think this will give us the best disease control.

#### 3. Fungicides:

The value of fungicides in



controlling disease in alfalfa stands has been well proven on our farm through many years of trials. In spite of all the burning and the vertical tillage, we normally see payback from mixing an initial fungicide with the bug spray, followed by a second fungicide about 15 days after bee release. Keep in mind that we have alfalfa weevils, so that initial bug spray might go on 10 days before your typical Matador cleanup. That first fungicide is typically targeting spring black stem using Priaxor or Headline. The second application is targeting botrytis and/ or sclerotinia using Lance. In 2015 we tried a new fungicide, Evito, which was a complete bust on trials on 3 fields. This trial cost us considerable money as there was a significant yield loss, as compared to the usual Headline followed by Lance. In 2016 we will do more comparisons of Lance (Group 7) vs. Delaro (Group 3 and 11). Probably the lesson here is use what works, and let someone else experiment.

## What Do Mole Hills Really Cost Us?

The control of pocket gophers in alfalfa seed production is a continuing issue that has been discussed in a number of our newsletters. We use an in-ground application of Phostoxin for gopher control with amazing results. We no longer have any mole hills, or the accompanying mess left by badgers digging out the gophers. A number of growers are starting down this road. It will take time, but if their results are similar to our farm, it will be worth it. Having fields free of those pocket gopher mounds makes for smooth spraying and a dirt free harvest.

This fall we had at least twenty lots containing dirt smeared seed. This usually amounts to least 5% more dockage on the lot. This is perfectly good seed that is lost. Some dirt always stays with the seed, increasing inert matter. The high inert matter becomes a concern when exporting overseas as they have a low tolerance for soil. The soil could contain diseases that these countries do not have in their soil. With all these factors taken into account you can see why it is very important to control the pocket gophers in your fields.



A scoop full of soil from the fanning mill

## FOR SALE: Mole Hill Leveling Shovels



Now that we no longer have mole hills, we are selling

our mole hill leveling shovels. They work excellent on any heavy duty cultivator with a 50 degree shank. See http://www.haukaas.com/leveling-shovels/. Their shovels worked good, but their  $\frac{1}{4}$ " mild steel blade wore out really fast. We made replacement blades from  $\frac{3}{8}$ " thick AR plate  $\frac{1}{2}$ " longer which really improved the life of the blade. **\$75 each** includes  $\frac{1}{2}$ " G8 bolts that keep the shovels on at 8 mph+ when they hit a stone. We have 65 of these modified shovels for sale.

## PREPARING FOR THE SEASON AHEAD

If you are a long term alfalfa seed grower/survivor, you already know most of this:

Alfalfa seed production requires a lot of timely management and labor. Anything you can do now to ease the time crunch from May to September is well worth doing. Give some thought to:

- Get those "will use" special chemicals ordered now. Things like bug spray, fungicides, weed spray and desiccants may be a given in your operation. Sometimes issues in other crops can use up all the supplies before they are needed on alfalfa seed. At least get them ordered. If the commodity crops eat up all the Matador in the system by the first of August, what will you use on a late plant bug or aphid attack? The same thing can happen with desiccants like Regione if all the pulse guys decide they are going to desiccate their pulses.
- Students can be excellent help with the incubator, putting out bee hives, bee trays, moving shelters, pulling weeds. Line up the good kids now, so you have them for the summer.
- Maybe you're not happy with the job your new big rotary combine did on your alfalfa seed. Buy those different concaves and sieves now while you have time to do good research.
- If you're thinking about Phostoxin on pocket gophers, make sure someone on your farm gets their on farm fumigation license. You need that license to purchase Phostoxin.

## **Those Great Big Rotary Combines**

These machines were designed to harvest corn, wheat and soybeans at amazing speed while putting a fair product in the tank and not too much crop back on the ground. When it comes to harvesting alfalfa seed they can leave a lot to be desired. Many alfalfa seed growers have one or more conventional combines in the shed that come out only for the alfalfa seed harvest. Usually rotary combines have a tough time to thresh the



crop. Concaves with narrow gaps between the wires are usually better than blanking off the entire concave. Set it tight and run up the rotor RPM. The cracked seed lots we see usually come from conventional combines. If you have lots of late rain, you will have lots of hay to put through. Separating fine seed from hay takes time. They have so much horse power, that we tend to drive them so fast that the term "through put" applies to all the seed going right through. Ease off that 500 hp a bit. This winter we saw many seed lots full of pods, sticks and assorted trash. When the crop is poor, these combines have to put something in the hopper. Guys are trying plastic sieves, air foil chaffers, round hole sieves, even slotted sieves to do a decent job. You need to be careful as some of these combines have a very unconventional fan/air system. We've had the Case/IH 8000 series machines for about 6 years, and we're still learning. Take some time to check the "through-put" on the ground. It is pretty easy to put 50 lbs/acre on the ground. One last word—harvest on time. Alfalfa stressed by disease, bugs, heat and desiccant doesn't survive high winds very well.

### **Canadian Seed Growers Association (CSGA)**

For the 2016 growing season, certified alfalfa seed crops can still be inspected by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) or third party inspectors that are licenced for alfalfa. There should be a new list of inspector services available around April 15 on the CSGA website.

In early May you should receive annual membership renewal from CSGA that you will need to complete. You will also receive a renewal for crop inspections on current alfalfa seed fields in production. For fields under contract to Pask Farms, we can do that renewal for you, we just need to know who your inspector will be. We can also assist in the application for inspection on new production acres. If anyone needs help with signing up for the online services with CSGA, or with applying for crop inspections, please call Gavin and he can help you through it.

## Seed Plant Improvements at Pask Farms

In the seed plant, our focus is always on doing a better job of processing, while using less labor to do more pounds per hour. Lloyd is working with a new mill, twice as big as the one it replaced, while James has a new electronic girlfriend in the bagging room. It has been a very busy winter, with six weeks of 24 hours a day of processing. Your alfalfa seed goes all over the world, but most of it is planted in Canada and the USA.



## All The Usual Bad Guys:

#### SWEET CLOVER:

This has been a huge issue this winter in cleaning many seed lots. Sweet clover is virtually impossible to clean out, and the marketplace is becoming much more fussy. Europe only tolerates about 35 sweet clover seeds per 25 gms of alfalfa seed, and they are a low price market. Most guys in Canada and the USA want ZERO sweet clover, and many buyers will limit sweet clover at 1 or 2 seeds per 25 grams. We had two contract seed lots delivered here with 75 sweet clover seeds per 25 gms. What sweet clover means is a lot less money in your pocket. If common alfalfa seed

is oversupplied, seed lots with sweet clover will stay in the farmers bin. The only market left for this stuff is the cheap "cowboy" blend with no label or grade in Western Canada. That is a small market with low pricing.

Chemical control measures include Velpar and/or Princep Nine-T applied in the late fall or early spring when the alfalfa is dormant. They only control seedlings, not the established plants that will cause you all the trouble this year. So they are a long term solution. If you establish alfalfa with wheat you can spray Embutox (2,4-DB) or Pardner prior to the wheat heading. This gets some of the sweet clover seedlings.

Roguing works and isn't as hard or expensive as people think. Pulling the plants

when they are flowering eliminates both the sweet clover seed in the combine tank as well as more sweet clover seed shelled out on the ground to cause problems down the road.

#### CANADA THISTLE:

Don't have any! Establish alfalfa so you can spray Embutox and Pardner in the establishment year. But we can all end up with lots of Canada thistle when its wet. The best plan is to spray Pardner at the recommended rate on a hot, sunny afternoon in July at about bud, early flower. It cuts Canada thistle seed production big time for that year. It is also pretty hard on sweet clover and volunteer canola. So far we can't pick up any detrimental effect on alfalfa seed yields.

#### **CLEAVERS AND KOCHIA:**

These guys are pretty much resistant to Group 2 (Pursuit, Odyssey, etc.). The best tools we've found are Edge, Authority and Valtera. The Valtera also provides pretty good suppression on volunteer canola.

#### ALFALFA WEEVILS:

They have been a big problem for us for a long time, and are slowly working their way north and west. They can be devas-

tating to the point of no buds, no blooms, no crop. We use Lorsban early or Matador later if the counts are low. We have killed all the weevils early, just to discover we need one more touch-up of Matador before bee release. There is nothing worse than getting your bees out, and then discovering the weevils are still on the attack.

#### **CUTWORMS AND FLEA BEETLES:**

Seeding alfalfa seed in rows on canola stubble means you need to be very diligent on constantly checking for damage to the small alfalfa seedlings from these guys. Lots of crawling down the row looking for missing plants and gaps in the rows, plus digging for cutworms is essential. Another option is to throw the environment to the wind, and spray the field anyway! We constantly have areas in newly planted seed fields damaged by cutworms and flea beetles.

#### FINE TUNING:

**Micro nutrients** occasionally show promise on someone's test plot somewhere. Some times it is on the companies test plot that is selling the micro nutrients. In spite of everything we've read, we can't get a constant response to these products on our farm.

**Growth Regulators** fall in this group as well. We tried a couple of growth regulators in 2015, without any meaningful results. Still it would be great if we could stop the alfalfa "ranking out", without hurting yield.





Pulling Sweet Clover

#### FROM THE PICTURE COLLECTION

This looks like a good start to the year





Spring Pocket Gopher Tune-up with a Little Phostoxin



No Pardner Here—Pretty Ugly

Pardner in July

Lots of weevils !



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## Safe Farming Everyone!!

Whatta ya mean you're stuck? You need the track hoe again??