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## Spring Newsletter 2013

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### Contracts And Pricing:

Prices for alfalfa seed have remained steady for the 2012 crop. We paid \$1.80 per pound for the good quality common seed and most of the contracts will bring around \$2.00 per pound net to the grower. It was another tough year in the seed plant. Most growers harvested "something", but a lot of it was marginal seed. Late germinating weeds like canola, cleavers, kochia contributed to the dockage, with canada thistle in almost everyone's seed. The mole hill dirt just added to the tough cleaning. Progress was slow and dockages were high. Some years we can blend poor seed lots into good seed, but there wasn't a lot of good seed to work with this year.

Jason had that frustrated look all winter, while James spent more time loading screenings than he did loading clean seed.

These are the years when no one is happy. The customers aren't happy as they don't have much seed to sell, and the quality is borderline. We're not happy as cleaning goes slow, some lots need re-cleaning, and all that effort results in a small amount of clean seed. And you're not happy because the crop was poor and the dockage was high. The only good thing here is that prices have remained steady.



## Markets—Seed and Bees:

The alfalfa seed markets continue to get smaller. North American prices are too high for Europe and China. Dairy and beef look to corn, oilseed meal and other by-products, to replace as much alfalfa forage as possible. Lucky for us, production acres are way down and yields have been poor, so prices are steady. The USA seed companies can still contract the limited seed production they need in good seed production areas, at prices comparable to our prices.

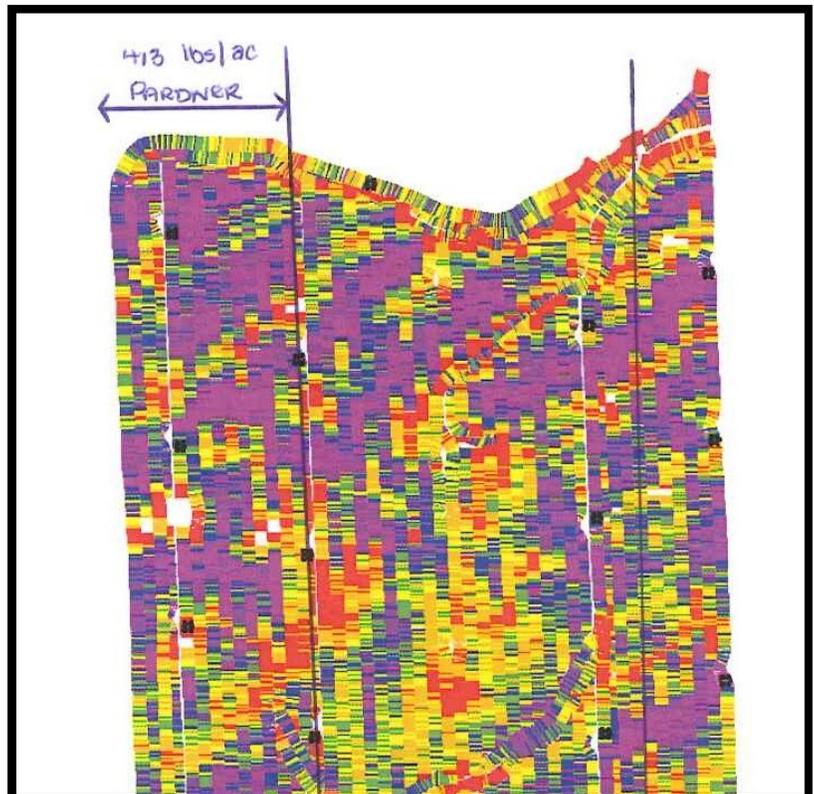
The bees continue to be the bright spot, as almost all the bees were sold for \$100 or more per gallon, even though bee increases were pretty good. It is interesting to see California, a large alfalfa seed producing state that has traditionally produced alfalfa seed with honey bees, now buying a significant number of leafcutter bees, even at these high prices. The issues in honey bees, combined with the pollinating value of leafcutters, continue to keep this crop profitable. For the first time, lack of leafcutter bees has prevented planting new alfalfa seed acres in the USA.

## Alfalfa Seed Production Notes:

There were a couple of products we noted in our fall newsletter that we will expand on in 2013.

First, Pardner followed by Pardner for seed production suppression of Canada thistle and volunteer canola. These applications are made on very hot days, preferably under good growing conditions. We had good luck with the first application on June 26<sup>th</sup>, and the second application on July 19<sup>th</sup>. We also did some combinations with fungicides. The suppression look good, and we can't see any effect on alfalfa seed yield. On this yield map, the purple is good yield, and the red and orange are poor yields. You can see the Pardner area on the left of the map looks as good as anything. So we plan to do more of this in 2013.

Kochia is becoming a bigger problem in Saskatchewan. We returned to an old product – Edge – in 2012 with good results. So in 2013 we have the granular applicator on the “stubble flattening – mole hill leveling” cultivator that has the modified mole hill shovels. We hope to break down any remaining stubble, level any mole hills, and apply and incorporate granular Edge in one field pass.

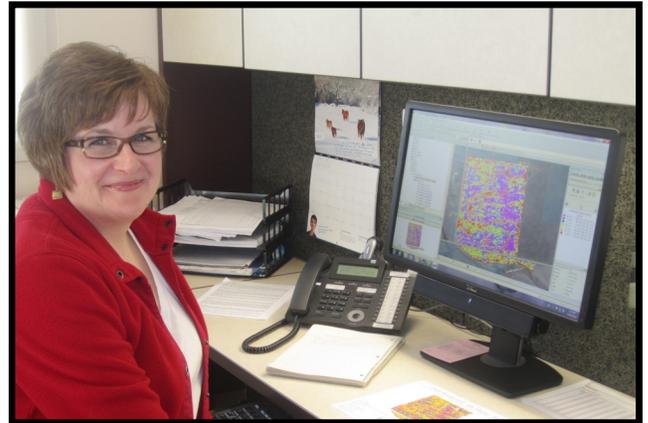


## Disease Control Results in 2012:

We got a good burn on almost everything in spring 2012, which gave us excellent initial control of spring black stem. Then we applied Headline prior to bee release, with a Lance follow up about July 20<sup>th</sup>. The seed set looked excellent, but the rain and high humidity didn't let up. We stepped in with another fungicide about mid-August, hoping to keep all the seed we had set. No luck – most of that initial set rotted off.

At harvest, we map yields on all our fields. Kim, Craig, and Murray spend significant time measuring yields on the different fungicide applications.

Based on our yield maps, it appears the 3<sup>rd</sup> fungicide application helped keep the income tax under control, but didn't help any on the disease. It is hard to give up on a crop, but sometimes that is the best decision.



## Contract Production or Open Market?

This year we paid \$1.80/lb for common, and most of our contracts will bring the grower \$2.00 net. With such a small spread between common and certified, why not just grow common seed? The advantage of open market seed includes:

- \* You can grow the high seed yielding variety
- \* You can sell it to whoever you want, whenever you want
- \* The dockage could easily be less
- \* You get paid right away

What does a contract offer? A GUARANTEED MARKET - with guaranteed minimum price with potential for more if the market goes up, guaranteed delivery, and timely payment.

Open market production has been a good option these past few years. Everyone is thinking this is the way to go. Before you leap into this, remember the common alfalfa seed market is shrinking. In spite of big reductions in seed acres and 3 years of poor yields, prices have not increased as have other commodities. This is a small market, easily over supplied at these prices. Europe gets bent out of shape if your seed has volunteer GMO canola in it. Both Europe and China are price sensitive markets. They would be much happier if the prices were 25% lower.

**Remember, when everyone is heading in the same direction, often everyone is wrong.**

## High Yielders and Dogs:

Which alfalfa variety yields the most seed, especially in our climate? In choosing a variety of canola, wheat or barley, yield is a major factor. When it comes to alfalfa seed, we grow whatever varieties we are given, and hope this latest variety can yield seed on our farm. When seed yields are disappointing, we are quick to blame it on the variety. At one time, the Alberta Irrigated alfalfa seed growers did seed yield trials, and published seed yields as compared to checks like Beaver and Algonquin. These trials were discontinued some time back. The growers said “we have to grow the varieties that are good for forage, so we’re stuck with whatever they yield for seed.” When doing contract production, there is some truth in that. All we can do is chose varieties we know, or go with a breeding program (Dairyland, FGI, European, etc) that has given us good results in the past.

We decided to look at variety yields on our farm, looking at all our data from 1999 to 2012 inclusive. This study included 168 fields, 24,000 acres and 56 varieties from over 10 different breeding programs. These are only fields on our farm, keeping variables like weed control and bees per acre as constant as possible. The varieties are as diverse as Rambler, Peace and Algonquin from western Canada, to varieties grown for Europe and Argentina. Varieties from USA companies like Cal/West, Forage Genetics, and Dairyland figure prominently in the mix. For each field we recorded the variety, the breeding program, and the year of stand. We entered the yield, and compared the yield to the average of all our fields that year. We also entered the bee increase on that field, and compared it to the average bee increase from all our fields that year. So what did we learn?

First, seed yields are highly variable on the same farm using the same bees and management. Our poorest variety only yielded 53% of average, while the best variety yielded 151%. In both cases, that was one field, one year, which really doesn't tell you anything. We looked at variety groups, putting European varieties in one group, Western Canada varieties in another group, Forage Genetics varieties in another group, etc. This combined more varieties, more fields and more years. Here we saw that the overall winner on seed yields at 115% of average were the Western Canada varieties which included Rambler and Algonquin (No Rangelander in the mix!). European varieties came in at 102%, most USA varieties were at 102%, but one particular US company came in at 88% of average.

This variety grew tall, pollinated well, and looked super on August 1st.



**The question is:      What will happen to this seed if heavy rains come in August?**

## Good Seed Years and Bad:

So which varieties yield good in “good” seed years, and which ones come through in the wet years? In the top three years, these were our best and poorest yielders each year, all yields are net clean seed:

Year	Best Field	Yield	Worse Field	Yield
2006	USA good hay type	661 lbs/a	European variety	457 lbs/a
2003	USA creeping	604 lbs/a	USA variety	311 lbs/a
2001	USA good hay type	609 lbs/a	Argentina variety	368 lbs/a

In the three poorest years, again these were the best and worse:

Year	Best Field	Yield	Worse Field	Yield
1999	USA hay type	233 lbs/a	USA hay type	55 lbs/a
2004	Eastern Canada hay	208 lbs/a	USA hay type	54 lbs/a
2012	USA hay type	245 lbs/a	USA hay type	82 lbs/a

The high yields in poor years were all from first year fields, which was more important than the variety. Another general trend in the data is that the well-established fields of USA varieties with rapid re-growth, tend to get killed in the wet years.

## How About Old Fields and New Fields?

How do first year fields yield as compared to old fields in both wet and dry years? The good years occur when drought follows too much rain, as happened in southern Manitoba in 2012, where they harvested a bin-buster! Our top 3 years, and average yields on new and old stands line up as follows:

Year	1st Year Fields	2nd Year	3rd + Year
2006	600 lbs/a	515 lbs/a	525 lbs/a
2001	609 lbs/a	420 lbs/a	370 lbs/a
2003	360 lbs/a	550 lbs/a	400 lbs/a

Note – in 2003 we had a really poor establishment on our 1<sup>st</sup> year fields.

Year	1st Year Fields	2nd Year	3rd + Year
1999	129 lbs/a	153 lbs/a	75 lbs/a
2004	180 lbs/a	165 lbs/a	95 lbs/a
2012	210 lbs/a	160 lbs/a	130 lbs/a

Our poorest crops came out like this:

Overall, it looks like 1<sup>st</sup> year fields are winners, plus those old fields had some pretty expensive fungicide applications. We attribute the drop in yield to more plant disease and excessive growth as the stand really cranks out the hay. Our data shows a solid 15 – 20% yield boost on 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year fields, provided we get a good establishment. This is a more complex problem, as establishment costs, cost of moving shelters, and crop rotation enter into the decision.

## BEE INCREASES VS. ALFALFA VARIETY

We keep the bees from each field separate, then harvest, weigh and test the bees from each field. This lets us look at the bee increase by variety and year of stand.

Does the variety affect the bee increase? Looking at individual varieties, and variety groups, there appears to be no relationship between bee increase and variety over the long run. There are big differences from one field to the next in any year, but this averages out in the long run.

Does the year of stand affect bee increase? Based on these 168 fields, the answer is NO – averaged out over the long term, bee yields were similar on 1<sup>st</sup> year, 2<sup>nd</sup> year and 3<sup>rd</sup> stands.

## SO WHAT IS THE FINAL ANSWER?

If assured market and minimum prices are important to you, grow contract seed on some (or all) of your farm. If growing open market, grow a variety which has been a good yielder for you, or a variety which will bring a premium, or a western Canada type variety that doesn't grow 6' high, fall over and rot off. We have given this a lot of thought, and will continue to have 100% contract seed on our farm. As far as the bees are concerned, variety doesn't seem to matter, but alternate leaf material like wild buckwheat will help the bee crop (Canada thistle doesn't work!).

**Finally, WEATHER IS EVERYTHING. Even the dogs are good in a good year.**

We have had a long stretch of fighting water. The memories of the struggle are still fresh. This has been a long winter. We started plowing snow on November 1<sup>st</sup> and haven't quit yet.



But as farmers, we live in the hope that comes each spring. We remember the good years, and fade out memories of the busts.

This was the harvest of 2006, and this particular field averaged over 600 lbs/acre clean seed. We know it will come again.

**Maybe in 2013.**

***Safe Farming!!***

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