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Fall Newsletter 2013

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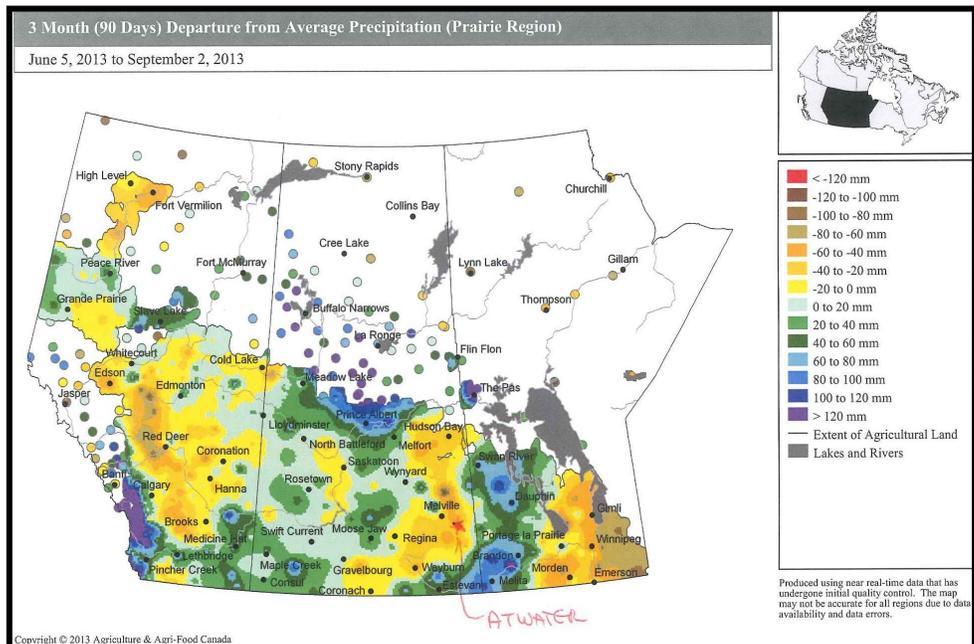
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The Year So Far:

Farming is always about the weather, and 2013 has been no exception. Right now many of you are harvesting record barley, canola, and wheat crops. These are dry land crops grown with below normal precipitation, but the high yields are due to the very high water table built up over the last three years.

The alfalfa seed crop is a bit different story. The first two weeks of July were excellent bee/pollination weather – hot and dry. Then we got rain, followed by dry, cool weather for 4 weeks. The more rain you got thru mid-summer, the poorer your alfalfa seed crop.



You can see that Atwater is located in the middle of a drought area, yet our regular crops have been excellent. The sub-soil moisture that fed those crops, also kept the alfalfa growing. Those of you who got more rain – see entire area north of Saskatoon – had the initial seed set rot off.

The Year So Far Continued



Looking at our alfalfa seed crop, we see three crops. The seed pods set in July are very ripe and brittle. One more good rain in July or August and that seed would have been lost. Next there are amber colored pods containing seed that is nearly mature. This is the seed set on better days in the 4 week cool stretch.

Finally there are plump green pods, set the third week of August, and they need another 10 good days to finish up. The forecast looks good – hot, warm, no frost in sight. So we hope to get that to get all that seed. There are some wide swings in expected yields depending on the area rainfall, the field and the grower. And it's still not in the bin!

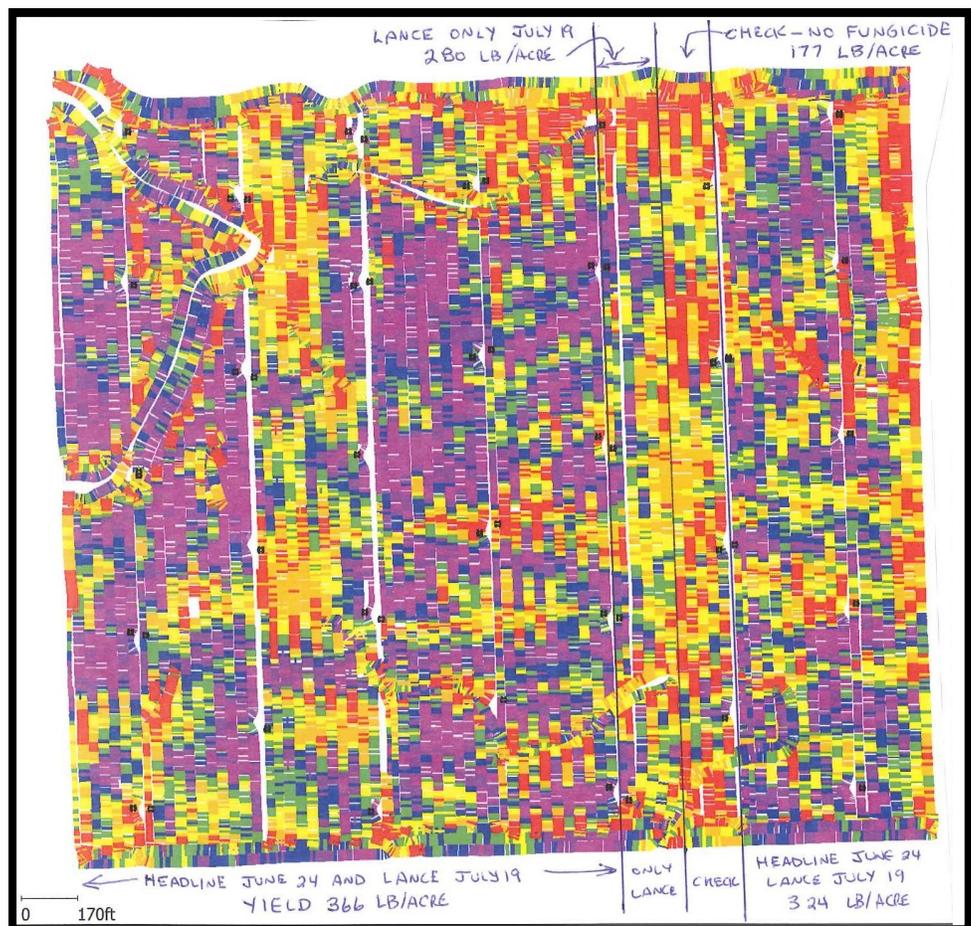
Alfalfa Plant Disease And Fungicides:

Alfalfa seed crops are often decimated by spring black stem, sclerotinia and occasionally botrytis. The problem is all about excessive moisture causing excessive growth. The initial growth is overgrowth with new growth. Eventually everything rots, and the plant regrows from the crown. Can we effectively control this problem with fungicides? On our farm, the final answer is "YES, TO A POINT". Spring burning, a June application of a fungicide such as Headline, followed by a July application of another fungicide such as Lance, has given us good returns on our investment most years.

This yield map shows the increased yields from fungicide applications. The black dots are bee shelters, and the white lines are mowed roadways. The purple colors are yields of 350 lbs/acre or more, while red and yellow are in the 100 to 200 lb range. Note the check at 177 lbs/acre, while the 2x fungicide treatment is in the 350 lb range.

HOWEVER, we think there is a point of no return, where all the fungicide in the world can't save the crop. That happened to us in 2012. That year our test areas that had FOUR fungicide applications showed no yield improvement when compared to two applications.

Nancy Johns reported that fungicide applications in most growing areas appear to have paid dividends this year.



Leafcutter Bees:

After that great bee release in July, tunnel capping was pretty slow thru to about August 10th. The bees still had a lot of life in them, and we saw lots of bee activity, seed set, and more new cocoons made thru to the end of August. It seems these bees have so many “working hours” in them, so if they have a two week weather “layoff”, they pick up the slack when hotter weather returns.

Our guess is we have an average, to a bit above average, bee return. The leafcutter bee market continues to look strong. Last spring, there was more demand for bees at \$100+/gallon prices, than there were bees. Classic economics tells us the price was too low, plus right now we have a more favourable US\$ exchange rate.

At the same time we are seeing more people focus on leafcutter bee production using methods such as providing leaf material by planting buckwheat or hauling lambs-quarters. Some bee keepers have tried improving bee returns by pollinating tame buckwheat, sweet clover or trefoil fields.

The leafcutter bee industry appears to have a bright future, but usually “What goes up, must come down”.



The Northern Pocket Gopher, or Moles:



OK, You got that one, but it looks like there could be another 1,000 left out here!

As many of you know, inexpensive, low labor mole control has been a long term goal on our farm. We have developed an inexpensive, simple, minimal labor, method to eliminate these pests. And no—it isn't trapping. After a run at trapping, Craig thought there must be an easier way!

The equipment and process that we developed and patented has nearly eliminated the northern pocket gopher (or mole) from our farm.

FINALLY, we have to really look to find a mole hill in our alfalfa fields, rather than just step from one mole hill to the next. Imagine—alfalfa fields without mole hills!

We get to enjoy a quicker, trouble free harvest, reduced dockage from dirt smeared seed, and smoother fields.

Koenders Manufacturing has plans to bring this technology to market.

Weed Control:

The little parachute seeds of Canada thistle and sow thistle have spread everywhere these past few years. These weed seeds require moist ground for about 10 days to get established and we had those conditions for 3 years in a row. The end result is lots of Canada thistle and sow thistle in most alfalfa seed fields. The best solution is to start over with a new field established under conditions less favourable to these weed seedlings. During the establishment year, Pardner and Embutox both help to kill new seedlings. Using canola as a companion crop makes initial thistle control a tough proposition,. Once the alfalfa gets established, Velpar also controls new seedlings (unless it rains so much the Velpar disappears!). But right now, we're stuck with this big mess in these old fields.

We have tried various combinations of Pardner, Basagran, Solo, and Odyssey with different timings. The best "one shot" control seems to be full rate Pardner about 10 days after the bees go out. This is best done on a sunny 30 C afternoon.



One test we did was on a five year old really ugly field. On July 11th, under cloudy skies and only 25 C, it got full rate Pardner + 25% rate of Odyssey. That pretty much stopped the sow thistle and Canada thistle from flowering, which was better control expected.



We also applied quite a bit of Edge (very expensive) with our mole hill shovel cultivator and harrows. This gives pretty good control on kochia and lambsquarters. Some of the chemical company programs make wild oat control pretty reasonable, so we've been adding this to the pre-bloom bug control to get those late germinating wild oats. That has worked well for us.

Aphids And Weevils:

The alfalfa weevil continues to widen its territory, and inflict serious crop damage on the unwary alfalfa grower. This spring the weevil hatch was very late, often hatching after the growers had completed their pre-bloom bug spray. We thought we had zero weevils, but we had enough by the time they quit hatching. Dimethoate (Lygon, Cygon) is pretty ineffective on these guys. Matador is better, but only kills what is hatched when you spray. Nancy Johns feels these weevils do more damage than we realize, as they are eating the buds and bloom. Some people had to re-apply Matador only 10 days after their bees had been released, which always takes some bees.

Aphids are a "southern" problem, but can be hard to kill with bees in the field. Matador should be the weapon of choice, but it can be pretty ineffective on pea aphids, especially if applied in warmer conditions. If you have a thick, rank stand, aphids may actually help dry down and stress the stand. Because they are a late season pest, the buds and bloom they eat will never make seed in time for harvest regardless. Also aphids multiply quickly, so you can kill them all one day, and the same numbers reappear within a week. Pest control in August is about balancing crop damage, beneficial insect damage and potential bee damage. There are no easy choices here.

Seed Cleaning The Hard Way:

Our RM celebrated its 100 year anniversary, including a parade with farm family floats. So we thought it appropriate to take our seed cleaning business on the road, complete with 1913 equipment and staff. Both mills are hand cranked, and Craig, Tracy and family were cleaning wheat on the parade route.





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Alfalfa Seed Market:

This market continues to hold its own. Last year we paid \$1.80 per pound for common alfalfa seed. Our target on average contract production was \$2.00 per pound net to you. This year the US\$/Cdn\$ exchange rate is currently in our favour. We have made a number of sales would give you more than \$1.80 provided the exchange rate and market hold. This translates into:

\$1.85 per pound net to you for common seed

Let's hope this market and exchange rate hold or get better. Send us your samples of contract production and open market seed as soon as you can. We pick up the seed in your yard, and pay you within 7 days of delivery.

Safe Farming!!

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