



# Agri-News

June 1, 2009

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## Seeding for Swath Grazing

When it comes to seeding for swath grazing, an Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development specialist says that barley can be seeded by the middle of June while triticale, oats, and oat/barley mixtures can be seeded as early as the first week of June.

“We’ve had a nice, open spring this year and as many producers are finishing up their grain and oilseed planting, others are starting to think about seeding their swath grazing sites,” says Barry Yaremco, beef and forage specialist, Ag-Info Centre, Stettler. “One of the more common questions we have been getting at the Ag-Info Centre is when to best seed a swath grazing crop.”

Yaremco says several studies across Alberta and Saskatchewan tend to tell the same story. “The later you seed the less you will get. Those late-June early-July plantings miss several weeks of the best growing conditions and are likely to obtain yields that are two thirds of a May seeded crop. For most, this is likely a loss of one ton per acre. For example, most barley varieties need approximately 1250 growing degree days (GDD) to reach the soft dough stage. Based on the average values for the Red Deer area if you seed on July 1, you are going to obtain the heat units by the end of September. Hopefully you haven’t run into a hard frost by then.

“If you back up your planting date to the middle of June you are approaching the 1250 GGD mark by the middle of September. While you may consider seeding even earlier it is a fine line between going for the best yield and having a high quality swath come December. Central Alberta can have enough rainfall and heat in late August and early September to cause significant spoilage. The cooler temperatures of late September tend to reduce the amount of quality loss and mold growth in the swath, particularly among those mold varieties which could be harmful.”

Aside from the big yield losses, another penalty for seeding too late can be a higher accumulation of nitrates in the crop, particularly July seeded oats.

While the base levels for nitrate toxicity are likely a little too conservative when applied to swath grazing, there are so many variables that producers should take the test results seriously until they have a chance to discuss it with their vet or nutritionist.

“Less likely, but still a factor to consider, is the effect light frosts and near freezing temperatures can have on the

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mineral content of plant tissue,” says Yaremicio. “Cold stress on immature plants followed by a few days of decent growing weather may cause plant potassium levels to increase while sodium, calcium and magnesium tend to drop. From your cow’s dietary point of view this can be less than ideal and may cause tetany concerns.”

All of these factors lead Yaremicio to his recommendations for when to seed swath grazing sites. “Ideally, you want to plant early enough to take advantage of spring moisture, but late enough that you are swathing the crop just before the killing frosts of fall. To have the best combination of yield and quality barley and triticale should be swathed early dough, while oats must be cut in the milk stage. Research data from Lacombe indicates that in most cases, barley could be seeded by the middle of June. Triticale, oats, and oat/barley mixtures would be okay seeded as early as the first week of June.”

For further information on swath grazing, call the Ag-Info Centre at 310-FARM.

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## **How to Decide if Reseeding is Necessary**

There are a number of considerations producers should keep in mind when trying to decide whether or not to reseed a crop.

“As an agronomist, I have been called out a number of times to examine crops that were possible candidates for reseeding,” says Nick Underwood, Reduced Tillage agronomist for the Peace Region. “Sometimes it isn’t that easy to decide. You not only have to decide whether the crop needs to be reseeded but also with what.”

The most likely crop to have a problem is canola. A common scenario sees the crop emerge and then get hit by a late hard frost, making it appear that reseeding is needed.

“First off, don’t make any rash decisions,” cautions Underwood. “Wait three to four days and then have a close look at the plants in different parts of the field to see if the growing point is dead or if there are signs of life. Count live plants per square foot in several places to come up with the number of living plants in the field or the part of the field in question.”

Underwood says that the easiest way to count is per foot of row. “For a good canola crop you need 7 to 17 plants per square foot. The date is also a key consideration. The later you seed, or reseed, the lower the yield potential. A low plant count that was seeded early may do as well or better than a higher plant count that was reseeded late.”

If there are less than seven plants per square foot, a reasonable crop may still be anticipated. However, it will mature more slowly as it branches out to fill in the spaces.

“Weed control will be more important in this situation,” notes Underwood. “If direct seeding, it will be necessary to spray out the remaining plants if a reseeding decision is made to change crops. In this instance, a cheap phenoxy herbicide will be required if the frozen crop is RR canola. A short-season barley is the best choice for reseeding in this case. If reseeding to canola, it should be resistant to the same herbicide as the original crop, but it should be a shorter season variety.”

Reseeding cereals or peas is unusual because frost is unlikely to cause severe damage to those crops. “If the young crop is badly damaged by excess water, the reseeding will obviously be delayed and a crop change is likely,” says Underwood. “This may provide an opportunity to change to a fall-seeded crop.”

Underwood cautions to make sure that emergence is finished before assessing the crop and doing plant counts. “Also, confirm the cause of the poor plant stand. You want to make sure that the real problem wasn’t that you seeded at the wrong depth or too quickly, and that the frost wasn’t just the last straw.”

“Reseeding is less common than it used to be because of direct seeding,” adds Underwood. “When seeding the first time, aim for the right plant population at the right depth.”

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## **Start Checking for Flea Beetles**

Despite a generally cool spring, flea beetles are starting to emerge in some parts of the prairies. The Canola Council of Canada (CCC) is advising canola growers to check their crops regularly since flea beetle feeding can reduce yield and lead to a longer flowering period, later plant maturity, and shorter plant height.

“Early season feeding by flea beetles is characterized by pitting and shot holes on both sides of canola cotyledons, as well as pitting on the stem of the plant,” says CCC agronomist Matt Stanford. “After emergence, fields should be checked every few days for evidence of damage as canola is most vulnerable to flea beetle feeding at the cotyledon to 2-leaf stage. If flea beetles are present, check affected fields daily as problems can escalate quickly, especially if canola plants are growing slowly or are under stress.”

Due to cooler temperatures across much of the Prairies, canola emergence has been delayed in many fields. In this situation, it is critical to remember that the protection from the insecticide portion of the seed treatment starts when the seeds are first put into the soil, not when the plant emerges. In some of the earliest seeded fields, protection may be tapering off so as conditions warm, watch closely for widespread flea beetle activity.

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The economic threshold for flea beetle control is when 25 per cent or more of the cotyledons are damaged. If 25 per cent defoliation is reached, foliar insecticide application may be needed if plants are growing slowly or are under stress, and if beetle feeding activity is increasing.

Evidence of feeding does not automatically mean spraying is warranted, reminds Stanford. “Unwarranted spraying can cause harm to beneficial insects and can also contribute to the development of insecticide resistance. With current seed treatments, flea beetles must feed on leaf material and ingest the insecticide for control so some feeding damage is normal.”

Flea beetles make their way into canola crops from the edges of fields. By catching a problem with flea beetles early, producers can often spray the perimeter of their fields and stop the infestation before it becomes widespread.

Growers are advised to be particularly careful in areas that saw high flea beetle populations around swathing time last fall as this can be used as an indicator for spring pressure. These areas in Alberta include Lethbridge, Vauxhall, and St. Albert.

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## ***Farm Training Survey Demonstrates a Desire and Need for Training***

Beginning in January, the Agricultural Research and Extension Council of Alberta (ARECA) conducted a survey to determine public interest in returning to the land, and to assess what kinds of training, skills and background information people would need to do just that.

The results have been compiled and, according to participants, there is both an interest in and a need for a training program for new and transitioning farmers.

Of those surveyed:

- 90 per cent said that there was a need for farm training for new entrants into the business of farming
- 93 per cent indicated that there was a need for training for farmers who want to transition into a different aspect of the farming business
- 76 per cent said that there were insufficient resources for new or transitioning farmers to begin the process
- 89 per cent said that if new training opportunities were available to either enter into or transition within the farming business, they would attend

“We are encouraged by the response we received and the strength of the interest expressed,” says Dr. Ty Faechner, executive director of ARECA. “Clearly, there are those who are seriously considering making farming their career of choice.

If we can help make sure that those same people have the education and tools they need, it is our hope that we can keep current operations sustainable and help new farmers get off on the right foot.”

ARECA conducted the survey with a view towards creating a new program to address the training and information needs of those who might consider a career in agriculture. Tentatively titled FarmCraft, the program will be delivered by ARECA and its member associations throughout Alberta via the internet, conferences and workshops, as well as mentoring and apprenticeships. “Now that we know that there is an appetite for this kind of program, we are going to craft potential delivery models, and work on partnerships between ourselves and other agencies and organizations involved in sustainable agriculture in Alberta,” says Faechner. “Once we have those pieces in place, we can apply for funding and put the program into practice.”

ARECA anticipates offering courses such as:

- tools for getting a farm business started
- what is involved in owning and managing different types of farming operation
- marketing opportunities
- alternative practices
- farm business management
- production management

The Agricultural Research and Extension Council of Alberta (ARECA) is a not-for-profit organization working with producers to enhance and improve their operations through access to field research and new technology.

Made up of 17 member associations focused on applied research, demonstrations and extension in the areas of forages, annual crop and livestock production, ARECA acts as a strong united voice for producers by speaking on their behalf to industry leaders and government representatives.

Each member association delivers programs and develops projects that address the concerns and priorities of producers in their specific regions.

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## **Agri-News Briefs**

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### ***Beekeepers Field Day***

The 56th annual Beekeepers Field Day goes Friday, June 26, 2009, at the Beaverlodge Research Farm. Start time is 10 a.m. There'll be presentations and informal networking sessions focusing on apiculture research highlights from throughout the year. Guest speaker is Dennis vanEngelsdorp, acting state apiarist for Pennsylvania's Department of Agriculture and a member of the U.S. colony collapse disorder working group. Everyone is welcome to attend the seminars and enjoy the free noon BBQ lunch. For presentations and research information, contact Dr. Steve Pernal at 780-354-5135 or via e-mail at [steve.pernal@agr.gc.ca](mailto:steve.pernal@agr.gc.ca).

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### ***Lethbridge Research Station Crop Walk***

There will be a crop walk at the Lethbridge Research Centre on Thursday, June 4, 2009, at 9:00 am. Attendees should meet in the station's visitor parking lot at the between 8:45 and 9:00 a.m.. Issues and sites include: environmental effects of the "wild weather" on crops this spring; early effects of seed-placed versus sidebanded fertilizer with wheat, barley and canola; and, the effects of cold temperature injury on crops. For further information, contact Ross McKenzie at 403-381-5842, RobDunn, at 403-381-5904 or Don Wentz at 403-381-5845.

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### ***Peace River Forage Association Summer Tour***

The Peace River Forage Association is holding their summer tour on Saturday, June 20, 2009. Registration will begin in Fort St. John at 7:00 a.m. and in Dawson Creek at 8:00 a.m. local time. There is a registration fee of \$30 for members, which includes lunch, steak supper, refreshments and the bus ride. For more information or to pre-register, phone Chris at 250-789-6885 or 250-793-8916.