Hail Season Approaches

Alberta gets more hail than anywhere else in Canada, with most hailstorms forming over the foothills. The three key ingredients for hailstorms are soil moisture, surface heating, and a triggering mechanism, such as an approaching weather system or a dry breeze that flows down from the mountains, clashing with moisture over the foothills to trigger a storm.

High soil moisture across much of Alberta increases the risk of hail. With crops finally in the ground and another hail season fast approaching, farmers are hoping speculation that 2011 could be an active hail year for Alberta proves to be wrong.

“A lot of farmers have been telling me they’re concerned this could be a big hail year because of the extra moisture we’ve had across the province this spring once all the snow melted and it rained on fields that hadn’t dried out from last year,” says Brian Tainsh, Provincial Adjusting Manager with Agriculture Financial Services Corporation (AFSC), the Crown Corporation that administers crop and hail insurance in Alberta on behalf of the provincial and federal governments.

Soil moisture is especially high across southern Alberta and along the foothills west of Highway 2, from Drayton Valley down to the U.S. border. “Experience has shown when there’s this much moisture lying around, you can often wind-up with a fair bit of hail,” says Tainsh.

Geoff Strong, a meteorologist and adjunct professor at the University of Alberta who studies thunderstorms and hail formation across the province, agrees that increased moisture on the ground increases the risk of hail. “With the soil moisture we have in many parts of the province, I think we’ll see some fairly active hailstorms throughout the summer,” says Strong, explaining the more saturated the soil becomes, the more humidity that grain crops, soggy fields, and other vegetation release into the air, feeding hail-producing thunderstorms. “I expect we’ll see the most hail activity in central and southern Alberta where it’s the wettest, and less in regions that are drier. Of course, the more it rains in any area of the province, the more the hail risk increases.”

With soil moisture high along the foothills in early June, from Drayton Valley down to the U.S. border, that extra moisture could easily produce hailstorms in the coming weeks that
move easterly across central, southern and northeastern Alberta — intensifying as they pick up more moisture over the crop zones, explains Strong.

Last summer proved that even cool, wet weather can produce large amounts of hail. Hailstorms blanketed much of Alberta with crop damage reported in almost every part of the province due to frequent rain throughout the growing season. AFSC paid out more than $164 million in hail claims. Even the Peace region was hit by a few hailstorms, despite dry conditions.

“We’re hiring 10 more adjusters than last year, for a total adjusting force of about 140 people. They’re all equipped with GPS units and laptops, so they can file claims right from the field — making the process as efficient as possible so farmers can get paid quickly,” says Tainsh.

A large number of producers purchased hail insurance online last year — more than 10 per cent of all Straight Hail policies. “This will only be the second year that we’ve offered the online option. We’re expecting a lot of repeat and first-time users because of the two per cent premium discount and the flexibility of having access to hail protection day or night, without having to drive into town.” AFSC Straight Hail insurance is available at any time once crops emerge, and takes effect the next day at noon after a policy is written. For more information about hail coverage, producers can contact their nearest AFSC office, hail agent, or call the AFSC Call Centre at 1-877-899-AFSC (2372).

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Business Opportunity Grant Helps Producers Develop New Business Ideas

“The planning stage is a critical step in developing a business,” says Elaine Stenbraaten, a new venture specialist with Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development. “Growing Forward’s business opportunity grant provides an excellent opportunity to get some business advice and access resources. Usually people are good at production, marketing, or finance. This grant allows producers to hire the skills they don’t have.”

When Erika Backmeyer and her husband, David Robertson, took over the family farm near Bezanson, they knew they needed to find a business model that would work on their limited land base. As new entrants to the agriculture industry, they were eligible to apply for Growing Forward’s Business Opportunity Grant, allowing them to assess their ideas and work through the numbers.

“We didn’t have the capital to do this whole process by ourselves,” says Backmeyer. “To develop the whole business plan with all the different sections and all the different consultants is an expensive proposition, especially when you’re starting out. This grant will go a long way to helping us reach our goals with the farm.”

Backmeyer and Robertson wanted to start a sheep dairy so they could process cheese. Backmeyer explains that sheep milk has a higher solids content, which produces more cheese per gallon than cow or goat milk. Backmeyer and Robertson have also started a fruit orchard, and plan to open a u-pick operation and process the fruit they harvest themselves into fruit leather.

“We’ve seen a lot of benefits just from going through the feasibility assessment, and nailing down what we want and what kind of capital that requires,” says Backmeyer. “We can see that there is a market with good returns that eventually should be able to support our family without any off-farm income.”

A consultant can help producers with a feasibility assessment, which allows them to evaluate a new idea, Stenbraaten explains. The assessment can give them the confidence to go forward with their business. It can also save producers time and money if the business idea isn’t profitable or doesn’t fit their lifestyles.

“Growing Forard is currently taking applications for the business opportunity grant,” says Jodi Murphy of Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development. “The grant is geared towards producers starting new agricultural businesses or those who want to take their business in a new direction. Producer groups are also eligible.

“This program supports activities focused on assessing feasibility or opportunity, researching markets and building business plans that contribute to the success of a new business venture or new business direction to meet changing market and consumer demands.”

To start an application, Murphy recommends that producers get in touch with a new venture specialist by calling 310-FARM (3276). For a complete list of eligible activities and information on cost-sharing, visit www.GrowingForward.Alberta.ca

Growing Forward is a federal-provincial-territorial initiative.

Contact:  Jodi Murphy
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           Daryl Loback
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Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development’s Livestock Business Development Branch

The Livestock Business Development branch has 17 staff located throughout the province who work with producers, processors, distributors, retailers and associations within the following livestock industries:

- beef
- bison
- dairy
- elk
- horse
- pork
- poultry
- sheep/lamb
- pet food/treat manufacturing
- other: aquaculture, deer, rabbit

“Alberta Agriculture’s team of livestock business development specialists provide coaching, linkages to resources, including money, people and information, and deliver programs that improve the profitability and the competitiveness of the livestock industry,” says Leona Reynolds-Zayak, who works with pet food business development. “Areas of expertise are varied, and Alberta businesses can be assured that if they have a question or are looking for help or advice, one of the staff members in the livestock business development branch will be able to help.”

Specific areas of expertise include:

- business development
- marketing - niche, local or commodity level
- product and market differentiation
- value chain development
- risk management
- development of tools and methods to mitigate and manage risk and costs
- unique tax strategies
- business arrangements that will enhance clients’ operational efficiency
- financial management
- new technologies in traceability, feeds, range management and grazing
- established industry relationships
- traditional and cutting edge production techniques

Specialists in the livestock business development branch, your connection to resources for business growth, have a thorough understanding of the livestock industry and can assist Alberta producers navigate through the numerous programs and services available.

Contact:  
Ag-Info Centre  
310-FARM (3276)

Picking the Right Shelterbelt Trees

Shelterbelts protect farmsteads, protect soil and crops and act as snow catches as well as preventing drifting. When planning a shelterbelt, three main factors should be considered, the size of the area to be enclosed and protected, the room needed for the requisite number tree rows, three is the minimum recommended, and the species that best suit.

Whether you are planning a shelterbelt to protect the farmstead, a field or a roadside hedge, find the information you need before buying your seedlings. Factsheets on planning a shelterbelt, planting and maintaining a shelterbelt can be found on Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development’s website at www.agriculture.alberta.ca

The varieties and choices of trees, shrubs and hedges that grow well in Alberta are numerous. By typing shelterbelt varieties in the search field on Alberta Agriculture’s website, you will have at your fingertips, information on poplar, willow, maple, ash, oak birch, chokecherry, lilac honeysuckle, bush roses, dogwood, spruce, pine and larch. Each variety’s factsheet provides plant characteristics, site preference, hardiness, uses, problems, disease susceptibility, as well as pruning and maintenance information.

Once your shelterbelt is established, be sure to spend a little time maintaining and caring for it as you would any valuable resource.

Contact:  
Ag-Info Centre  
310-FARM (3276)  
www.agriculture.alberta.ca
Auction Market Traceability Pilot Proves RFID Systems Work, Reveals Challenges

In September 2009, Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development contracted Integrated Traceability Solutions (ITS) to install and operate Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) reading systems in six auction markets throughout Alberta. During 307 sales over nine months, more than 248,000 head of cattle were scanned.

“There were two things that we were really conscious of during this process,” says Rob Bergevin of VJV Foothills Livestock Auction. “The first thing was no extra stress or extra movement on the cattle. The other was that we did not want to impede the speed of commerce. We did not want to slow down the momentum of the sale or the flow of cattle that we were accustomed to prior to having this system.”

Bergevin explains that both these concerns were addressed by putting some thought into how the system was set up. At VJV Foothills, the cattle are scanned in an efficient set-up that is designed to ensure that there is no extra stress placed on the animals.

Bergevin sees the system providing value for producers. “Before we had the scanner, we weren’t always sure if we had a 20-month-old heifer or a 30-month-old heifer,” he says. “With the scanner, we can provide that information to our buyer, and enhance the value of the cattle for our customer.”

Bergevin adds that the system also allows them to provide complete reports to buyers of the cattle they purchased, including ages, and saves the office staff time and effort.

Yancy Crosier of ITS notes that 4.7 per cent of the cattle coming into the yards had no tags or inoperable tags. Thanks to the RFID systems, scanning crews were able to identify and retag these cattle.

“We’ve proven that the systems do work. They may not be 100 per cent, but without doing this pilot, we wouldn’t know where the gaps are. Now that we know where the gaps are, we just need to close them,” says Crosier.

During the pilot, scanning crews ran into problems with tags that were difficult to scan because of the way they were positioned in the ear.

“We’ve been working with the reader companies because we figure it’ll be easier to change the reader design than it will be to get everyone to tag the cattle correctly,” says Crosier.

Valerie Sowiak, a project manager with Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development, indicates that there are also process issues to work on. For example, before a sale, cattle can be unloaded at any time, so Canadian Cattle Identification Agency field reps and scanning crews were not always on-site.

Once the ear tag and process issues are solved, the plan is to explore the potential to integrate the information from the RFID tags with the auction market databases. This would allow the markets to display information in the sales rings and transfer it to invoices. Sowiak also hopes that this would save the office staff time and help the auction marts manage risk.

ITS came up with several different scenarios for the costs involved in installing and operating the RFID equipment. One factor affecting cost and potential benefits is how the cattle are scanned. The project looked at scanning cattle on move-in only, scanning on both move-in and move-out, and scanning on both move-in and move-out as well as linking the data to the Livestock Identification Services permit. All scenarios relay data directly to the Canadian Livestock Tracking System.

Costs will also be affected by which business model the market adopts. Options explored include: the markets owning and operating the RFID equipment; the vendor owning the equipment, but having the market operate it; hiring a third-party to run the market-owned equipment; and hiring a vendor who both owns and operates the equipment.

Operating costs range from $1.97 to $3.51 per head, depending on the scenario selected (see tables). Capital costs range from $1.69 per head to $3.62 per head.

Absorbing all these costs would be a major concern for auction markets, Bergevin states. “We’ve been looked after to a degree by the government and Growing Forward,” he says. Growing Forward provided funding to the pilot project as part of an initiative to improve traceability in the livestock supply chain.

“We need to be on a level playing field,” Bergevin adds. “If we’re going to be traceable at the auction markets, it would be prudent to have those cattle traced at electronic or country sales as well.”

Despite these issues, Bergevin does see value in the system, and VJV Foothills is currently training its staff for when ITS hands over the reins. “I really hope that we can take this thing to fruition,” he says.

Contact: Ag-Info Centre
310-FARM (3276)
Growing Forward
Control Points Covered,
Reputation Assured

Managing a processing operation with a food safety focus is a mission that’s never fully complete. New challenges emerge from time to time and fortunately, new tools and processes are always hot on their heels.

For an inside look at how a large, diverse Alberta processing business ensures a high level of food safety performance, take a look at Bassano Growers Ltd. With two processing plants, dozens of vegetable varieties and hundreds of fresh, frozen and value-added product combinations, this is a business with a lot of moving parts.

Founded in 1970 as a farmer co-operative, Bassano Growers Ltd. now operates as a privately owned company that grows, gathers, packs, warehouses, processes and ships vegetables and vegetable products. Over the years, as the product line has multiplied, and so have the technical demands of ensuring all products are safe for consumers.

“When it comes to food safety, the company leaves nothing to chance. We operate within a food safety environment that is recognized by food industry standards,” says Alan Stuart, vice-president of Bassano Growers Ltd. “The company buys from growers who practice and monitor good agricultural practices. The plants are operated with HACCP principles and good manufacturing practices. We employ full-time food safety personnel, and our programs and practices are monitored by customers or by third-party audits.”

In 2010, Bassano Growers completed a multi-dimensional food safety upgrade that included new hazard identification techniques, staff training and the latest in software.

“The software is called Safety Sync and it was developed with the help of the Alberta Food Processors Association,” says Stuart. “We are now using this software at our Bassano facilities for training, chemical handling controls and other requirements related to food safety.”

Because Bassano Growers’ investments in process and staff education will have an immediate benefit in terms of food safety, the business was eligible to apply for funding through the Growing Forward food safety processor program.

This program helps processors improve their food safety practices in several possible ways: through adoption of food safety systems, undergoing food safety audits, participating in food safety training or through capital equipment purchases that directly impact food safety. Capital expenses are eligible for a 50-50 cost share to a maximum of $50,000. In the case of Bassano Growers, the company was reimbursed 70 per cent of the cost of engaging consultants to assess their needs and direct a renewal of their systems. For such non-capital costs, a $25,000 maximum applies.

When Bassano Growers first put this project on the drawing board, they had clear goals in mind: add integrity to their food safety systems, increase efficiency and reduce overall costs.

“With the support of Growing Forward funds, we were able to access professional assistance and resources to adapt to the industry’s evolving food safety demands,” says Stuart. “Our staff now have an increased awareness of food safety issues and are more effectively trained. We have new tools to control documentation and personnel practices. The possibilities for having food safety issues are being controlled and reduced.”

To Janice Futz, a safe food systems specialist with Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development, this is the kind of outcome that Growing Forward funding is meant to encourage. “Bassano Growers has earned a solid reputation in the industry by being progressive and diligent on food safety issues,” says Futz. “This upgrade to their systems and training puts them in an even better position to identify and capture new opportunities in the future.”

Processors looking for more information can contact the Ag-Info Centre at 310-FARM (3276) or visit the Growing Forward website at www.GrowingForward.Alberta.ca

Growing Forward is a federal-provincial-territorial initiative.

Contact: Daryl Loback
780-415-0645
Agri-News Briefs

2012-13 Funding Consortium Open Call

The Agriculture and Food Council of Alberta is a member of the Funding Consortium announced that the 2012-13 Funding Consortium Open Call was opened on June 1, 2011. On the Funding Consortium website are links to each individual Funding Consortium member organization. Applicants can click onto individual member websites to get a sense of what the priorities are that Funding Consortium members are focused on and whether their idea fits with these priorities. Deadline for Letter of Intent online submission is October 18, 2011 at 6:00 p.m. Details of the Call are online at the Funding Consortium website at www.fundingconsortium.ca

June 2011 Hort Snacks

When conversing about the weather, the tone of the discussion will really depend on where you live. But as always in a growing season, moisture and heat are the two topics that top most discussions. This month’s edition of Hort Snacks is packed with timely articles providing information and links to resources needed to be more successful this season and into the future. There are a few interesting events coming in the near future, including a couple of field days in June and August. One of the main articles features a list of new or altered pesticides (fungicides, insecticides and few herbicides), part of the annual pesticide database update from Robert Spencer, commercial horticulture specialist with Alberta Agriculture. There are a number of “new” products and many products have expanded registrations. Another article deals with late blight. If you take nothing else from this edition, please understand the extreme importance for vigilance and monitoring for late blight. It is a potential threat again this year. The June 2011 Hort Snacks is posted to Alberta Agriculture’s website at www.agriculture.alberta.ca and type Hort Snacks in the search field.

Latest Crop Report Indicates Significant Seeding Progress

The latest crop report was posted to Alberta Agriculture’s website. It indicates the province saw a return to cooler, showery weather; but, despite the challenging conditions, producers were able to make significant seeding progress with 90 per cent of the province estimated to be completed by the end of the first week in June. Seeding progress is similar to last year but slightly behind long-term historical averages. Approximately 60 per cent of the crop has emerged. It is currently estimated that approximately 2 per cent of the province will remain unseeded due to wet conditions with most of these acres in southern Alberta again this year. For all the details and details on specific regions, go to www.agriculture.alberta.ca/cropreport