

Dry Soil Conditions Pose Risk to Alberta Hay and Pasture

Producers Reminded of February 28 Deadline to Insure Perennial Crops

With soil moisture at extreme lows across much of the province, cattle and livestock producers are becoming increasingly concerned as they near the end of their winter feed supplies. Many are worried about the impact dry soils could have on their pasture and hay land this spring once the snow melts, says provincial forage and grazing specialist Grant Lastiwka. He speaks with producers province-wide through the Ag-Info Centre telephone hotline operated by Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development (ARD).

Much Drier than Last Year

“We’re much drier than this time last year,” confirms ARD soil moisture specialist Ralph Wright. Extremely low soil moisture, typically seen once in 12-to-25 years on average, is being recorded across large areas of Alberta. “That extreme dry soil zone is four times larger than this time last year,” says Wright.

In southern Alberta, conditions are drier than normal along either side of the Highway 2 corridor, ranging from 1-in-12-year lows in Foothills M.D. to one in 3-to-6-year lows across most of Cardston County at the U.S. border. Soil moisture across the rest of the south is generally near normal, ranging to moderately high around Medicine Hat.

“Most of the province didn’t get enough precipitation to recharge soil moisture reserves this fall before the ground froze,” says Wright. He adds plenty of spring rain will be needed to replenish dry soils and avoid a repeat of last year when drought conditions across much of the province crippled pasture and hay production.

Expect Lower Yields and Delayed Grazing

But Lastiwka warns no matter how much rain and snow melt we get this spring, producers in areas with low soil moisture should probably expect lower hay and pasture yields and definitely a delayed start to the grazing season – at least a month later than usual in the driest areas. “Plenty of rain will be critical, but prolonged dry soil conditions mean these plants are stressed and may take twice as long as healthy plants to grow,” he explains.

Lastiwka explains that the root systems and energy reserves of forage plants in many areas have been depleted by lack of moisture. He adds in many cases the damage is greater due to the hard choices livestock producers have been forced to make - such as overgrazing and under fertilizing amid high feed and fertilizer prices, and low returns in a struggling industry. If livestock begin grazing too soon this spring, he warns the damage to pasture will be much worse, and take longer to undo.

Feed Supplies Running Low

“It’s a serious situation because the majority of producers are very tight on feed supplies. Very few have enough to carry them through an extra month of feeding this spring,” he says, noting hay prices have doubled due to short supplies. “Many producers rely on extending the grazing season on pastures as long as possible as the most cost-effective way to feed their herds. Now that tool may not be there when they need it most.”

February 28 Deadline to Insure Hay and Pasture

Producers need to plan now for a later start to grazing, the risk of lower yields and the possibility of another dry spring, says Lastiwka. He recommends they consider strategies such as reducing herd sizes to stretch feed dollars further, renting additional pasture, fertilizing forage stands if possible, and insuring hay and pasture land. With the February 28 deadline to insure hay and pasture in Alberta just weeks away, producers must decide soon whether insurance will be part of their plan.

“There are no easy answers. Managing your risk is important. It’s a matter of positioning yourself within what’s best for your operation,” says Lastiwka.

Insurance Claims Exceed \$54 Million

Last year, more than \$54 Million in hay and pasture insurance claims were paid out across the province compared to \$6.5 Million in 2008, says John Kresowaty, co-ordinator of Perennial Insurance Programs with Agriculture Financial Services Corporation (AFSC), the provincial Crown Corporation that administers crop insurance in Alberta. Most of the nearly 5,000 producers who purchased Perennial Insurance on hay and pasture received claim payments last year. With about two-thirds of the premiums and all administration costs funded by government, Kresowaty says producers view hay and pasture insurance as an affordable way to cover risk.

Hay insurance is based on an individual’s hay production, while pasture insurance is area-based, relying on satellite imagery and moisture readings at weather stations to determine when claims are triggered, explains Kresowaty. AFSC has added 10 new weather stations to its network this year, for a total of 183. “The more weather stations we have, the closer they are to each producer’s land base, and the better they reflect moisture conditions on each farm,” he says.

Producers who want information on Perennial Insurance should contact their nearest AFSC office or phone the AFSC Call Centre at 1-877-899-2372 before the February 28 deadline.