

For Immediate Release:

Dry Conditions Cause Concerns for Alberta Livestock Producers

February 29 Perennial Insurance Deadline

Dry soil conditions and below-average snow packs across much of the province could mean a late start to spring grazing and an increased risk of winterkill on hay and pasture stands for livestock producers, cautions a provincial forage specialist.

“Producers should plan for delayed growth on their hay and pasture lands this spring and be prepared to keep their herds on winter feed supplies for at least a week longer than usual – possibly longer, depending on when we get some moisture,” says Grant Lastiwka, a forage and grazing specialist with Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development (ARD).



As the February 29 deadline to insure hay and pasture in Alberta approaches, John Kresowaty with AFSC says dry soil conditions and below-average snow packs could delay spring grazing for Alberta livestock producers this year.

Lack of Moisture ‘Really Snuck Up On Us’

“The dry conditions really snuck up on us after such a wet start to the growing season last year,” adds Lastiwka. “It’s surprising how quickly things turned around.”

Soil moisture and snow packs are well below normal across large pockets of central, eastern and northern Alberta, including much of the Peace region, with soil moisture ranging from an estimated 1-in-6 to 1-in-50-year lows in many areas, according to provincial soil moisture maps at www.agric.gov.ab.ca/acis. Southern Alberta is the main exception with soil moisture generally near normal to moderately high across the region.

The risk posed by dry soils could quickly lessen or turn around completely with some very early rain or wet snow once the ground starts to thaw this spring, points out Lastiwka. But with conditions currently so dry, and the February 29 deadline to insure hay and pasture in Alberta just weeks away, “farmers need to be aware of these issues now so they can assess soil moisture on their own farms and decide how they want to manage that risk,” he says.

Ralph Wright, a provincial soil moisture specialist with ARD, says an extremely dry fall is largely to blame for the current conditions. “Alberta had a wet June and July, but thirsty crops and forage stands used up all that water. By early September, our soil moisture was depleted. And from August to mid-November the rains basically stopped falling in many parts of Alberta – preventing the soils from getting a fall moisture recharge for next year’s crops before the ground froze.”

Slower Plant Growth; Increased Risk of Winterkill

With no moisture in the soil, many hay and pasture stands stopped growing in August and became dormant much earlier than usual – forcing them to survive longer on their winter energy reserves, says Lastiwka.

“As those energy reserves become depleted over the winter, the plants will be slower to start growing this spring. They’re also more vulnerable to winterkill – which could be a real issue this year, especially

on older hay stands,” he adds, pointing to the lack of snow cover and unseasonably warm temperatures Druythis winter, which were followed by a frigid blast of Arctic air in January.

More Than \$6 Million Paid in 2011

In 2011, more than \$6 million was paid on hay and pasture insurance claims across Alberta mainly due to lack of moisture, says John Kresowaty, Perennial Insurance Coordinator with Agriculture Financial Services Corporation (AFSC), the provincial Crown Corporation that administers crop insurance in Alberta.

Across central and southern Alberta, more than \$3 million was paid to producers who experienced limited rainfall late in the season and production losses on hay. Claims have also been triggered in southern Alberta by accidental pasture fires this winter due to dry conditions, high winds, and a lack of snow, says Kresowaty. He explains pasture insurance includes spot loss coverage for accidental fires and fires caused by lightning. Across northern Alberta and the Peace region, more than \$3 million was paid after an extremely dry, cool spring delayed hay and pasture growth.

With conditions so dry across the province this year, Kresowaty expects participation in Perennial Insurance will increase. “We often see that when soil moisture is dry,” he says, explaining insurance subscriptions increased across the Peace region due to drought conditions over the past few years. While most producers in the program insure every year, there are some who opt in and out depending on what the weather looks like in February and sometimes find themselves disappointed by Mother Nature, he says.

AFSC encourages producers to stay in the program every year with premium discounts of up to 20 per cent for Continuous Participation and an Experience Discount of up to 38 per cent for hay producers with a favorable claims history.

New Weather Stations

New to Perennial Insurance this year is the addition of 11 new weather stations to the provincial network, primarily in the Special Areas of eastern Alberta, bringing the total to 207 stations. “We review the network yearly, and when feasible recommend additional weather stations to limit the distance from producers’ land bases,” says Kresowaty, explaining Moisture Deficiency coverage for hay and pasture is based on precipitation at weather stations.

For more details about Perennial Insurance, producers can contact their local AFSC office or phone the AFSC Call Centre at 1-877-899-2372 before the February 29 deadline.