

Why's of Agriculture: What does the dry weather mean for the cows and the crops?

By Aimee Delaney, Ag Relations

It's been a very hot and dry summer so far, but you already know that. And you've probably heard how the drought-like conditions have been impacting agriculture. For both the livestock and crop producers a long period of little to no moisture could spell hard times ahead.

Like our lawns and gardens, when the water isn't available the plants have less opportunity to grow to their full potential. Plants with deep roots may be able to reach moisture deep within the soil, while other more shallow rooted plants may not be able to withstand the shortage. Crops and pasture lands are no different.



Unlike our lawns, when the local crops are not growing to their fullest potential it often means more than ugly aesthetics. Our local crops generally fall into 6 categories: feed (animals), food (people), fibre (cloth/paper), oil (food and industrial uses), ornamental (environment and aesthetics) and industrial uses (fibre and fuel). A drop in crop yield could result in less product availability to follow, especially when this impacts many farms at once.

In areas with pasture for livestock the grass is a necessity. If it's not growing, it won't take the cattle long to eat through the available grass and need to be moved to a new pasture soon or be fed supplemental feed from previous seasons or fellow producers. Sadly when the costs exceed the revenue it can make more sense to sell cattle and/or land than keep them. Which essentially means less 'goods' for us to enjoy to follow.

Here's the good news: both the provincial and federal governments have been working to create new initiatives, funds and tax deferrals to help offset some of the debt and costs of our local farmers. Local governments (like Red Deer County) are also finding way to help keep our producers moving forward such as the roadside grazing opportunities. These opportunities may not correct the current circumstances, they may provide a solution to help our producers move forward.

For us, the consumers, we eat and wear clothes so this affects us too. Down the line, for meat at least, we may see a temporary reduction of costs at the grocery store. But while we may get a good deal now, we may see a shortage later with many farmers and ranchers having to sell livestock to stay in the black. For crop products like flour and canola oil, prices may rise as more and more crops are being used as alternative feed for livestock.

So what does it really mean? Some prices will go up, but in amounts that should be manageable for the average consumer. We may need to shift some money from other

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categories to the grocery budget, but we'll continue to feed our families and drive our cars as normal. Or at least until oil prices go crazy..

Each month we'll dig into a new 'Why' or in this case 'What' of agriculture. If you have an agricultural question you'd like me to dig into let me know at adelaney@rdcounty.ca