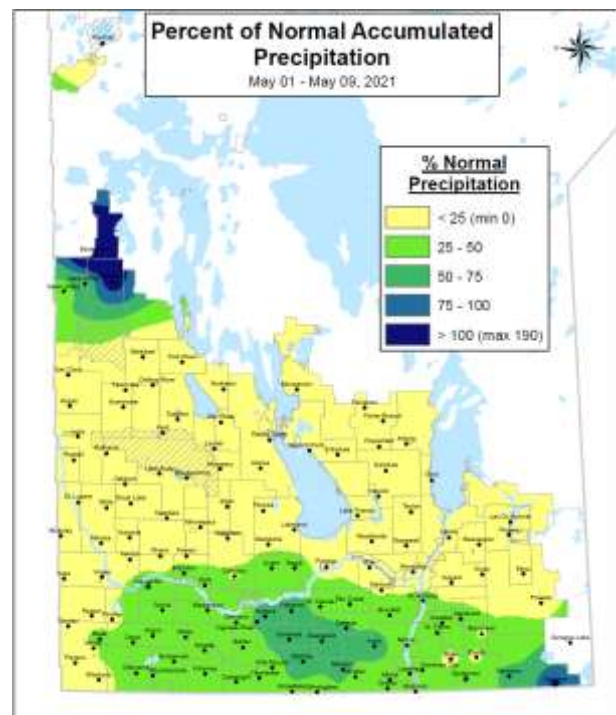
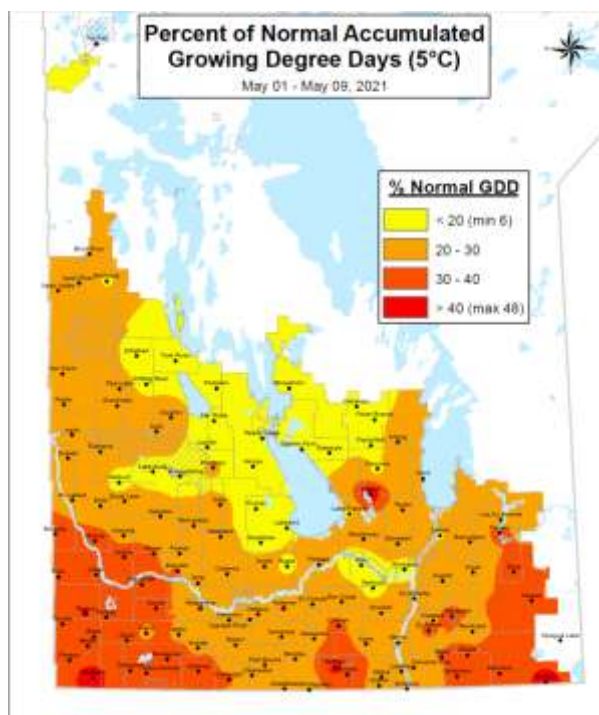


Grazing and Forage Management During a Drought

By John McGregor, MFGA Extension Support

All regions are reporting dry conditions and slow growth of hay and pasture fields according to the latest Mb Ag crop report. The charts below showing percentages of precipitation and temperature are well below normal for this time of year accounts for the slow forage growth we are seeing.

The dry conditions of last fall and the lack of precipitation this past winter also contributed to what we are presently seeing.



When we look at forage production in hay and forage fields we know that it's influenced by multiple weather related factors with moisture being the most important factor. For pasture, total plant production affects stocking rate and when demand exceeds production, decisions need to be made to over-utilize pastures, sell cattle or find alternative feeds.

When exposed to drought or dry conditions, grass typically responds by:

- Reducing growth amount above ground (crop height).
- Reduced root growth.
- Fewer reproductive tillers (seed heads) and plants remain mostly vegetative.
- When drought conditions become severe plants will go into dormancy.
- Reduced rhizome growth and formation of new buds that will produce next and future year's tillers.
- Lower carbohydrate (energy) reserve storage in the crown and roots

As one would expect, the timing and duration of drought conditions are key in the resulting effect on pasture growth. Dry conditions in April and May would impact growth of cool-season grasses and dry conditions from mid-May to mid-July would have a more pronounced effect on warm-season grasses. Spring temperatures may also affect the start of the growing season and use of available soil moisture.

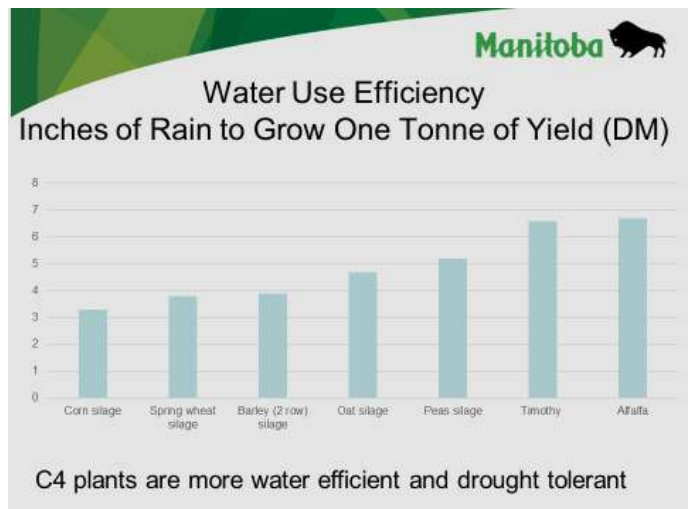
Precipitation amounts and timing this year are unknown, however, pastures that have been better managed or are in better condition will recover quicker after drought than poorly managed pastures.

Presently the uncertainty of how much precipitation we will receive this spring and into summer suggests that there needs to be a plan. The primary focus should be about balancing forage supply (growth, production) and demand (animal numbers). Keep in mind that grazing management through consecutive drought years is critical for future pasture health.

For pastures common recommendations include:

- Delaying initial turn-out to pasture.
- Reduction of stocking rates.
- Capitalize on growth of weedy species that might occur.
- Use rotation grazing to limit or manage the amount of leaf removal.
- Use alternative forages.

After a long period of feeding hay, delaying turn-out to pasture is one recommendation that many producers find difficult to follow. With spring planting underway one option for producing extra forage is to seed annuals.



Other than providing an opportunity for extra grazing, annual forages can provide additional hay or silage for fall and winter feeding. One of the advantages of annual forages is a requirement for less moisture per ton of production than most perennial grasses or legumes.

For more information on using annual go to the MFGA article [Annual Forages During a Drought](#) or [CropTalk April 28](#).