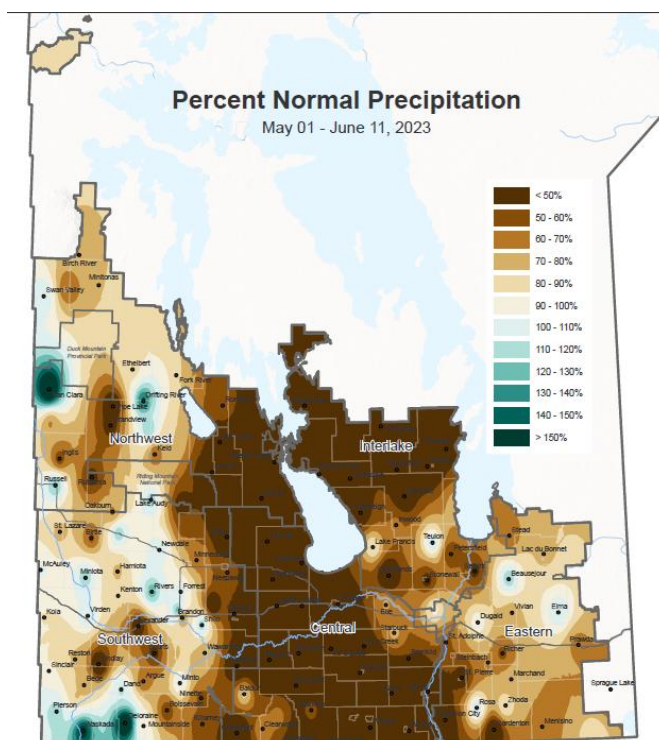


Forage Management in a Dry Year

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Moisture conditions across Manitoba are extremely variable according to the latest Manitoba Ag crop report,. Viewing the map below we can see that large areas of the Central and Interlake have received less than 50 percent of normal precipitation to date. Other areas of the province are well below normal for this time of year.



With the above normal temperatures and present winds, pastures are starting to slow down. Fields that are short of moisture will be slow to recover or may go dormant until rains arrive should these conditions continue now during the haying season.

If we look at any of the long range forecasts, they range from normal to above normal temperatures combined with below normal precipitation.

One of the lessons that we all learned from 2019 to 2021 is that when drought hits, the supply of forage declines and water supplies are possibly reduced.

Presently we are not in a drought situation but we are seeing how the present dry conditions are affecting both pasture growth and water supplies in dugouts in some areas of the province.

Have a Plan

It may seem early to be worrying about dry conditions and forage production but if there's one thing that 2019 to 2021 taught us is that if you wait too long to act then many opportunities disappear and your options become limited (and sometimes expensive).

When grazing pastures at this time be sure to follow your plan of grazing half and leaving half. This will help conserve moisture by providing shade and protection from drying winds to the soil surface. It also leaves green material that can intercept the sun

to produce energy for new growth once moisture is available. Finally it can provide emergency feed if needed later in the season.

Consider planting annual crops for additional forage. Cereal forage, like oats or barley can be sown anytime from April to end of June. Early seeding is best for stored feed but later seeding can produce satisfactory grazing for summer pasture. Cereals as cool season crops have greatly reduced yields when planted later in the spring or in the summer. Seeding cereals can also be done in late August seeding for grazing in the fall.

Millet is a warm season grass and could be considered as a forage source moving into July. Because of its fine stem and volume, special considerations will be necessary if taking it as stored feed.

Again, it's early, but crop residues can be a very economical feed to supplement pastures. Standing corn, corn stovers, or small grains, are a good source of crop residue that can be grazed. If these are suitable alternatives, plans may need to be made so that fields can be grazed which can include fencing and providing a water source.

Crop residues can also be baled for bedding or feed. Making arrangements ahead of time and lining up fields so that straw or corn stover can be windrowed and baled can save a lot of last minute running around to find a source.

When emergency or supplemental forage crops are needed, the economics of production should be considered. The variable or direct costs of producing pasture or hay may be higher than that of purchased forage. Generally, it is assumed that when weather dictates the need for "emergency" forage, local hay prices will also be high. This is an assumption many people make, but if the time is taken to price and compare these costs with the production costs of supplemental forage, buying hay may prove to be the most economical alternative. The availability of machinery and forage handling equipment will also play an important role in determining the economics of producing emergency and supplemental forage.

Dry conditions across Manitoba are variable and the next 2 to 3 weeks doesn't seem to have a lot of rain in the forecast but again that can change overnight. Is there a panic because it may be a bit dry in some areas? Probably not, but having a plan or making some decisions sooner rather than later may help deal with feed shortages should that happen.

The quote by Maya Angelou "Hope for the best and be prepared for the worst" is always good advice when it comes to weather and forage.