Watching those summer skies

Ted Brown

I'm continually amazed at the level of technology we have at our fingertips every day.

Medical diagnostics become more sophisticated every day, communications are faster right before our eyes, and there's a computer program to do virtually every task we could imagine.

But the one area that never seems to benefit from this technical rush is weather forecasting.

And as summer is now upon us, I find this season the weather has the most impact.

In the winter, if forecasters predict a storm, I take a 'wait-and-see' attitude, and deal with the snow (or lack of) when it arrives.

But in spring and summer, my farming background puts me on full weather alert. I watch the skies with more interest than any other time of the year. In spring, weather conditions dictate when crops can be planted, which in turn impacts their yields and harvesting dates.

But the most challenging part of summer weather is deciding when to take off the hay.

The old saying, "Make hay when the sun shines," is still in effect. No matter what level of technology farmers have at their fingertips, a field of hay still requires about three days of warm, breezy weather to cure, after it's been cut.

And sometimes nailing that 'window of good weather opportunity' requires a leap of faith with the weather forecasters, as well as a lot of luck.

I have a few fields of hay to take off, and I've been watching the weather like a hawk for the past couple of weeks. There's nothing more annoying than a field of spoiled hay. But at the same time, the longer we wait on the weather, the older and coarser that stand of hay becomes.

This past week, I decided to throw caution to the wind. As usual, I went online to Farmzone, a division of The Weather Network specializing in farm weather forecasts, with added information like drying index, heat units and all sorts of other bits of techno-dweeb information.

With the exception of a slight chance of 'scattered showers' Wednesday evening, the long range forecast was clear and sunny well beyond next Monday with 'very good' drying indices.

Fired up like a gladiator preparing for battle, I was good to go. Out to the field I headed, cutting down hay, with visions of the field covered in large round bales by the weekend.

After cutting part of the field, I stopped by the house to check Farmzone again. A slight adjustment— the clear weather was going to be cut short by a day or so.... okay, still good enough. But as the day wore on, the forecast deteriorated until it seemed pointless to be cutting hay.

Annoyed, I watched a barn swallow swoop by, diving for bugs, a good 15 feet off the ground.

That means fair weather. A quick glance at the barn roof revealed no pigeons on the peak, so by my great Aunt Agnes' estimations, no rain in sight. And the leaves on the trees weren't turned backwards like they do before a storm.

It occured to me— I'd reverted back to the same old methods my grandfather (and probably his forefathers) used to forecast the weather.

And time will tell if I was right or wrong.

I'll still use Farmzone as a source of info, but there are times those old methods still prevail.

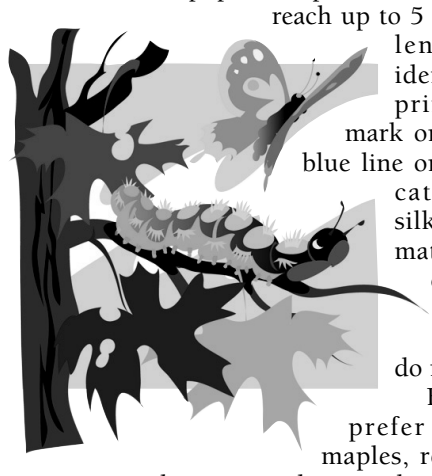
I figure one fact remains. My forefathers had no more hay spoiled by rain than today's farmers, yet they didn't have online weather forecasts to influence their cropping decisions. They simply used their eyes, their ears and their years of experience to make their decisions.

And in the grand scheme of things, it's the result, not the method, that counts.

Tree foliage under attack from Tent caterpillars

Halton Region is confirming what residents may have noticed— that there are particularly high numbers of Forest Tent Caterpillars (Malacosoma disstria) and Fall Cankerworms (Alsophila pometaria) in trees throughout Halton. Although these insects do not generally pose a threat to healthy trees, many people view them as aesthetically unpleasing and a nuisance.

The Forest Tent Caterpillar primarily feed on ash trees as well as poplar, maple and oak trees. They can reach up to 5 cm centimetres in length and can be identified by a footprint-shaped white mark on the back with a blue line on either side. The caterpillars spin silken pathways and mats but, unlike the closely related Eastern Tent Caterpillar, they do not make tents.



Fall Cankerworms prefer the leaves of maples, red oak and apple trees. Young larvae may be seen hanging from silken threads. Fully grown caterpillars are approximately 2.5 cm in length in varying shades of green.

Populations of Forest Tent Caterpillars and Fall Cankerworms rise and fall naturally in cycles and high populations may last up to four years. Multiple years of heavy defoliation by these insects can cause reduced tree growth and smaller leaf size. Trees weakened by other stress factors may be more susceptible and may die.

The public is reminded that before applying any insecticide, it is important to read the label to ensure the target insect is listed for control by the product.

More information about the Forest Tent Caterpillar and Fall Cankerworm, and control measures for these and other pests, can be found at www.halton.ca