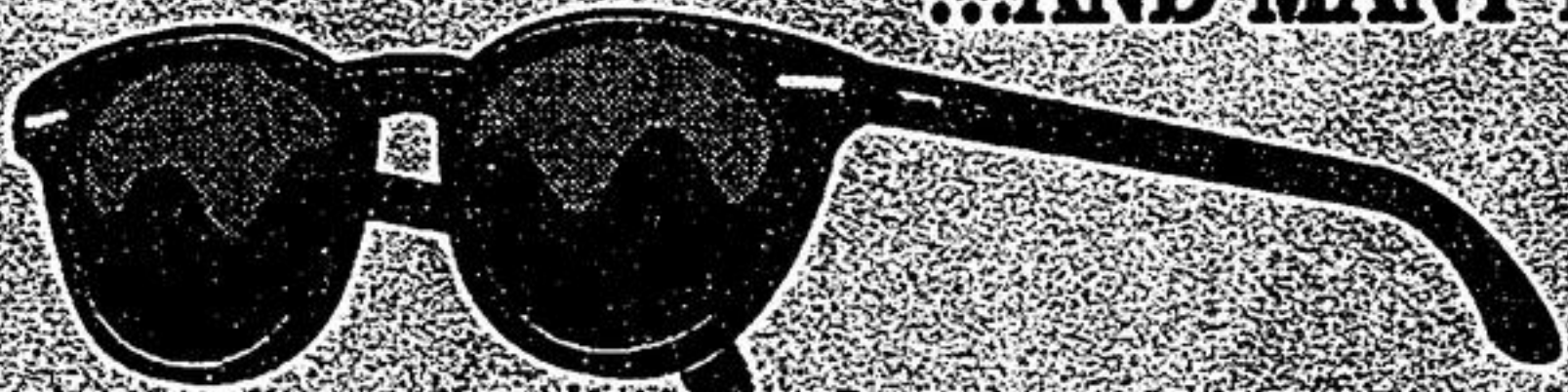


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ENVIRONMENT

Dry conditions worry farmers in northern York Region

BY LISA QUEEN
 Staff Writer

After almost three decades of watching dry seasons come and go, farmer Derek Hovious admits he's never seen a drought as severe as this summer's in the Holland Marsh.

"This is the driest summer in my lifetime," said the 56-year-old Bradford resident. "It's so disheartening."

Farmers started out on the wrong foot this year, and things have just gone from bad to worse. Last summer also saw little rainfall and snowfalls were scarce last winter.

"There was no reserve in the ground" for this year's growing season, Hovious said.

Looking at a brilliant blue sky without a cloud in sight on Tuesday, Hovious said this summer's lack of rain has left farmers high and dry.

"We have to do an awful lot of irrigation. But irrigation is just a Band-aid," he said.

"Sixty per cent is getting lost during the day to evaporation. It's a tremendous cost to do irrigation."

The main crops on Hovious' 105-acre farm are carrots and onions, although he also grows cabbage and celery.

He's already lost nine acres of onions and cabbage to the drought, but he's praying irrigation and rain will save the rest.

"We literally spend more money and more money and not know if we'll get the return," Hovious said.

"We need rain. The sooner, the better. If it's not soon, it will be too late."

Hovious said if the Holland Marsh doesn't get a decent rainfall within the next week, many crops could be destroyed.

Neighbours who grow Oriental crops such as bok choy have already lost this year's harvest to the drought, he added.

Tom Clarke is a fruit and vegetable advisor for the regions of York, Peel and Simcoe at the Muck Research Station. He agreed conditions this summer are harsh.

"It's been very tough. It's been a really abnormally warm and dry April and May, which made the establishment of crops very difficult, especially carrots," he said.

"It's been a real challenge for growers. They've done a lot of irrigation. It's been a lot of expense and time and money for irrigation."

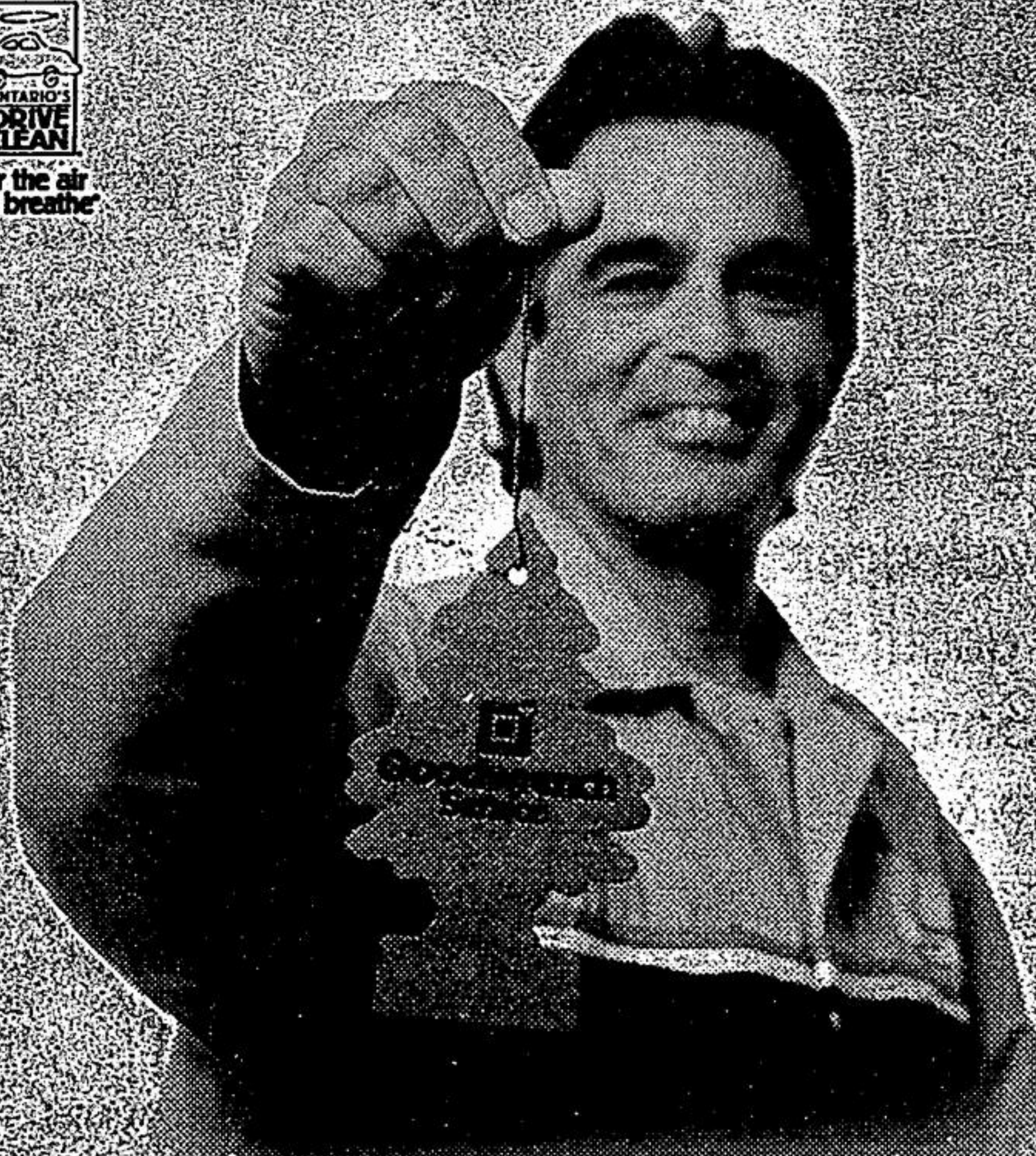
Clarke said the worst part is hearing weather forecasters predict rain and then never seeing a raindrop materialize.

"You hear stories about rain but I think the weatherman is making up stories," he said. "Most growers I've talked to said it's their toughest summer, just to manage things with the lack of water."

Clarke said consumers will have to wait until next month to find out whether a reduced harvest translates into higher prices at grocery stores.

But Hovious said it's the farmer who gets hit in the wallet, not shoppers.

"Grocery stores will charge the max. The farmer just gets less, that's all," he said. "You, as the consumer, have to pay top dollar. The consumer pays the same thing, the farmer just has to make do with less."



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