

Hope waning for farmers

As harvest time looms, York's farmers are relying on divine intervention to yield crop

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Staff Writer

Farmers across York Region are down on their knees with their fingers crossed. With harvest time looming, farmers believe divine intervention is their last hope. Wheat, corn, soy bean and vegetables need at least three weeks of frost-free, sunny, dry weather.

The weather gods can make or break farmers, including cash crop farmer Rodney King. Record-setting rainfall throughout the spring and summer took the cash out of cash cropping — King and his brother farm 1,000 acres in Stouffville, but the wet planting season prevented the Kings from getting on to 200 acres. Instead of growing wheat and soy bean, this critical parcel of land produced nothing.

The Kings did manage to plant 265 acres of wheat. However, the crop was hit with fusarium mould virus, severely dropping the market price. This mould reduces the wheat grade, turning it into feed grain suitable only for animals. The virus has hit about 90 per cent of all York Region wheat.

Of the Kings' 250-acre soy bean crop, one third is in good shape, one third is in "gamble" mode and who knows how the remaining will fair.

"It likely won't make it," King said.

This year, the Kings expected to gross about \$350,000 from their cash crop operation.

"We could be down between \$80,000 and \$100,000," King said.

In Holland Marsh, where much of Ontario's vegetables are grown, looks can be deceiving. At first glance, the marsh's carrot crop appears to be fantastic.

"The (carrot) tops look great, but there's no root," said Don Stevenson, local Federation of Agricultural spokesman.

Overall, this year's crop yield will be a drastic disappointment, Stevenson stressed.



STAFF PHOTO/JOERD WITTEVEEN

John Hoover of Webb Road in Stouffville thinks the corn crop is less copious than in previous years, as are his wheat and soy bean crops. Normally, these cornstalks would be towering over him.

"Actually, it's a double whammy: (market) prices are low and crops are poor. The Americans are producing like crazy. Such bumper crops drive the price down. We need a more level playing field. We're trying to get governments to recognize the situation. So far, we haven't been successful."

Newmarket farmer Carl Wierenga is pounding the pavement in search of a winter job. The wet planting and growing seasons prohibited Wierenga's 40-acre Holland Marsh vegetable and flower farm from producing enough to see his family through the winter. Wet land kept Wierenga from planting a critical 10 acres, while a number of onion and carrot plants simply drowned in the field.

"I'll have to find a winter job," Wierenga said. "I expect other growers are doing the same. But, I'm optimistic for the future."

Farmers can't be gloom and doom. I can roll with the punches even

though I'm losing 8 or 9 per cent. Yes, that's my profit."

Stouffville farmer John Hoover is looking for a miracle. Hoover needs plenty of sun, very little rain and absolutely no frost. In this race against time, Hoover is nursing 500 acres of corn and 300 acres of soy bean.

Only half of Hoover's corn is in good form and, if an early frost hits, the quality of this corn will drop.

Hoover's soy bean crop is small this year.

"The soy bean is one-quarter of what we usually plant," said Hoover. "And only half of that is any good. We need time and we need perfect weather conditions. Even at best, it will be a reduced yield."

Hoover is bracing himself for a serious financial hit.

"I don't have to worry about what the loss will be because it will be a lot. It will be more than a lot. I've farmed for 30 years, I've never

seen anything like this," he said.

Farmers across York Region will fix their eyes on tonight's full moon. Since cooler temperatures usually follow a full moon, this is a crucial time in the agricultural community. If we get a "killer frost," it's game over for many crops, Stevenson stressed.

Poor harvests touch many. Reesor Seed and Grain and other local agricultural businesses, including implement dealers, are also feeling the pinch. When crop yields are low, it means fewer tractors are sold. Merle Reesor's seed and grain business notices that 2000 is, indeed, a different year.

When the farmers couldn't get on the land to plant, many returned their seed to Reesor Seed and Grain. And Reesor is expecting to handle less produce because of an anticipated low yield harvest.

"The crops are very late," Reesor said. "They have a long way to go. The corn needs more time, it's three weeks behind. It'll be

standing another three weeks. We won't see corn until November."

Even York Region's hay crop was a disappointment.

"It was very poor quality," said Stevenson.

"It's difficult to make good hay when it rains and rains and rains. Many of the farmers took machines into the hay fields, scooped up the hay, chopped it up and blew it back onto the land. It all means good quality hay will be in very short supply this winter."

Agriculture in the Greater Toronto Area is usually a \$1.3-billion industry annually. How the weather will affect the overall bottom line is not known as yet, but it will be noticed.

Most consumers don't think about the weather or the farmer when buying food. The general public has forgotten that, throughout the spring and most of the summer, farmland in York Region ranged from wet to wetter. Water lay stagnating in low lying areas, farm equipment got stuck in the mud and farmers scrambled to come up with ways to drain the water from the soil while keeping the stored plants from dying.

The farmers got lots of sympathy, but little help from any level of government. Even Georgina Mayor Rob Grossi's goodwill gesture to give farmers extra time to pay their property taxes was denied recently by York Region council.

Regional councillors told the farmers to appeal to their local municipalities. If a Stouffville farmer is facing hardship, the town will respond.

"If they need some help with taxes, come and see us," said Whitchurch-Stouffville Mayor Wayne Emmerson.

The plight of the agricultural community shouldn't rest solely on the municipality's shoulder, Emmerson said.

"The province and the feds need to come through and help the farmers. Many are getting nothing for their crops."

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