

Local farmers brace for new season

By Naeema Siddiqua
Staff Writer

After surviving one of the driest summers in the history of Parkland County last year, farmers are optimistic about this season and they are searching the horizon to explore opportunities, according to local director of the **Alberta Barley Commission**, Albert Wagner.

"Our soils are depleted of moisture, there is no doubt about that, and spring is too early and that's a concern because moisture will leave the soil too soon. But we are always optimistic the rain will come," said Wagner, who has been a farmer in the area for over 20 years, specializing in barley, wheat and canola.

Though there are no clear indication of what this season will be like for farmers, a February drought

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report by the Government of Alberta recorded much lower than normal precipitation (less than 10 mm) for northern and central Alberta since December.

However, the report also pointed out January to March is generally the driest period of the year.

Despite the early arrival of spring, Wagner has faith the heavy fog the region recently experienced

will help trap moisture in the soil.

He also suggests that farmers practice direct seeding to conserve moisture.

While the weather could be an unpredictable hindrance, Wagner said Parkland County farmers have other worries to deal with.

"I think the biggest concern right now is that

in Parkland County the livestock industry reduced significantly over the past years," Wagner said.

"The number of base cows has gone down significantly and there is no hog industry. In order to have a viable feed industry we need a viable livestock industry."

In order to liven up the livestock and feed industry, the **Alberta Barley Commission** took several initiatives over the past years.

The commission is almost exclusively funded by farmers, each contributing \$1/tonne of barley sales, which is sometimes matched by external contributors like the federal and provincial governments.

The commission primarily uses that money to fund research and market development, and it's the only organization that still funds the annual City Slickers program in Stony Plain that gives city folks a taste of the rural life.

Wagner said the barley commission is also one of the biggest contributors of the Lacombe Research Centre where they research in areas of yielding, pest and disease control and other agronomic research.

"We are also trying to focus and partner with the livestock industry because they are still the





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biggest market for barley," he said. "Our partnership will help the livestock sector to be more competitive in the international market." As Wagner mentioned, the commission's attempts are reaching out internationally, especially in the emerging agriculture market of Japan. Alberta barley has already made a significant mark in the south-Asian country with the highly prized development of the Shochu alcoholic beverage.

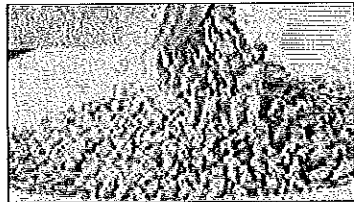
"The market in Japan right now is about \$250,000 tonnes of barley, and we are trying to achieve about a third of that market," explained Wagner. "That has the potential for 100,000 tonne of barley produced primarily from Alberta. When

you consider the acres that take up it's about 50,000 acres. That's very significant for Parkland County, because the soil in Parkland County is very favourable for growing barley." There are about 17,000 barley farmers in Alberta. Wagner anticipates more exciting developments to take place in the agriculture industry.

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