Two farmers in Manitoba are glad they didn't take a chance on corn this year

After 2004, be thinking Plan B

by Laura Rance, Farmers' Independent Weekly

With only one crop to grow, Alan and Clare Scott had only one big decision to make on their Boissevain-area farm last spring. But the stakes were mighty high.

As wet and cold seeding conditions pushed their seeding dates into June, they had to decide whether to stick with their plan to plant corn to feed the nearly 4,000 head of cattle they keep over the winter. Or should they make the switch to barley?

"We had all our corn seed bought," Alan said in a recent interview. Corn seed is expensive, ranging between $50 and $60 per acre. Corn also takes more fertilizer and requires more expensive weed control. "But the tradeoff is that corn usually will yield about one-third more than barley," he said.

It was tempting to stick to the original plan. "If everything came right and we had a hot summer we would probably have had enough heat units — but everything had to be right."

By the second week of June, the Scott brothers had lost their nerve. They switched their acres to barley.

Every time they look at their pile of silage this winter, they couldn't be happier.

The way the summer played out, switching from a long-season heat-loving crop such as corn to a cool-season, early maturing cereal such as barley not only secured their feed supply — it saved them a pile of money they would have spent nurturing a corn crop that hadn't a hope of reaching maturity before a freak frost hit August 20.

Corn will typically produce between 12 to 15 tonnes of silage per acre in their area. This year, it yielded half of that — if it was harvested at all. Meanwhile, their barley silage delivered a whopping above-average yield of 10 tonnes per acre.

In retrospect, the Scott brothers got lucky. They could just as easily have made the wrong choice as the right one. "This is the first year I can remember in a long time that we didn't grow corn," Alan says.

But good luck and strategic management often go hand in hand. Key to salvaging their situation last spring was the fact that they had the option of moving to Plan B.

Like a growing number of Manitoba farmers, the Scotts apply their fertilizer as part of the seeding operation in the spring. Had they placed fertilizer for their planned corn crop the previous fall, a last-minute switch into barley could have resulted in disastrous lodging.

For Scott brothers, Clare and Alan, having a Plan B paid big dividends in 2004.

Nature's curveball

Scott Day, the local agricultural representative with Manitoba Agriculture, Food and Rural Initiatives, says if there is one lesson to be learned from the extreme weather Manitoba farmers shivered through this year, it is the need to have a Plan B.

"Not enough producers have a Plan B," he said. "When Nature throws them a curveball of immense proportions like it did this year, they are scrambling."

Some subtle shifts in thinking and a few changes in management can have some big payoffs when things start to go awry.

Moving to spring fertilizer application is a case in point. Day told a recent agronomists' meeting that between 80 and 90 per cent of the farmers in his area traditionally applied fertilizer in the fall. But new technology and increasing time management issues have resulted in a sharp decline in that practice. "Most

Continued on Next Page

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— Chad Vandaele, Medora farmer and seed grower

people have switched to a one-pass fertilizing-while-seeding system," notes Day.

The single-pass system saves farmers time and fuel. But with the type of weather farmers in these parts have been getting in recent years, it also plays an important role in keeping their seeding options open.

Suffering through the coldest summer on record was just one more extreme to add to the list of low crop prices, high input costs and the BSE crisis putting pressure on farm incomes.

The first hint that conditions might be a little unusual came in the form of record-breaking cold that hit in February. Along came a blizzard that May. The summer was the coldest on record; a killing frost struck August 20, and farmers suffered through a harvest plagued by excessive moisture. "The bottom line is, we had a lot of wild situations this year," Day said.

But extreme weather is nothing new to agriculture in the province. There was a drought in 2002/ 2003, mid-harvest flooding in 2002, spring flooding in southwestern Manitoba in 1999 and the Flood of the Century in 1997.

"When you look back, we have extremes every one year in three or four in this province," he said. "Maybe we are just pushing the edge of normal on a fairly regular basis."

Early seeding pays

Day said one of the truisms to emerge from the variable conditions farmers in this province have experienced is the fact that early seeding almost always pays off — whether it's too wet, too cold, too dry or too hot.

Farmers who delayed seeding this past spring waiting for the soil to warm up or in some cases because they thought it was too dry were the hardest hit when seeding was put on hold by nearly a month of cold, wet weather.

It almost never pays to seed late, even if Manitoba Crop Insurance Corporation seeding deadlines are extended.

Day said the way the situation played out for growers this season, the late-seeded crops didn't reach maturity and suffered heavy frost damage in August 20. The crops seeded before the May 11 snowstorm performed reasonably well.

Under crop insurance, the two extremes offset each other, which left the farmer in many cases carrying the extra costs of those late-seeded acres — but with no compensation.

A cool season crop like barley loved last summer's growing conditions.

Nature's deadlines

When it comes to managing risk, Chad Vandaele of Vandaele Seeds in Medora heeds his own set of deadlines.

"Just because they extend the deadlines doesn't mean you are guaranteed a crop in the fall," he said. Likewise, there's no guarantee the costs of sowing those crops will be covered by insurance, if earlier seeded acres perform well. "You might end up losing $100 and you're not going to get insurance."

After a certain date, his Plan B strategy was to take advantage of the $50 per acre unseeded land insurance offered by MCIC. Then his decision-making focused on salvaging what he could from what remained of the production year with a minimum exposure to risk.

He hired an airplane to seed a low-input crop of canola — well aware there was no insurance safety net if the crop failed. The seed was harrowed in, but he didn't spend money on high-priced seed or weed control. All he was hoping for was a breakeven crop that kept the weeds from having a heyday.

"We did everything as cheaply as we possibly could. We were hoping for $100 an acre plus the $50 per acre unseeded insurance," he said.

The 25-bushel per acre canola that grew on that land wasn't a crop he'd brag about — and it was downgraded to sample after the August frost. "But we probably broke even in the end."

Vandaele also left 1,200 acres of land unseeded last spring — a move calculated to minimize his losses from the current year and maximize his opportunities for 2005. "Don't chance a crop when it's not going to earn you anything," he said. "All you've done is sat an extra 100 hours on your combine just for the pure hell of it."

"We would sooner take the $50 per acre. Maybe it doesn't quite cover all the land payments and equipment payments, but we haven't gambled $20 per acre in chemicals, $20 per acre in fertilizer, and $30 per acre in equipment costs — all to potentially not make a cent," Vandaele said. "A penny saved is a penny earned."

This isn't the first time he has opted for fallow during a difficult spring. After severe flooding in southwestern Manitoba during the spring of 1999, 4,000 acres on the Vandaele farm went unseeded.

True, it reduced their cash receipts for the year. But it also reduced their costs. And it allowed them to prepare the land for the following year, when it produced some of their best crops ever.

When the two years are averaged, Vandaele calculates he will at the very least come out even financially — and will have endured a lot less wear and tear on people and equipment — than if he'd struggled the way some farmers did to get every acre seeded in the spring and then harvested in the fall.

Again, it was his practice of spring fertilizer applications that kept that option open. Some farmers felt forced into seeding for fear of losing nitrogen that had been applied the previous fall.

That's where sowing a green manure crop — a late-seeded cereal, brassica or even letting the weeds grow, but not go to seed, can pay off.

"When plants are used as green manures, pretty well anything goes," says Martin Entz, an agronomy professor with the University of Manitoba. "Even weeds can make good green manure crops provided they do not go to seed. There are good green manure options that offer a wide seeding window."

Salvaging nitrogen

The advantage of sowing warm-season crops such as millets, sorghum-sudangrass —typically used for forage production — is that they consume large amounts of nitrogen fertilizer that may be present. That nitrogen is retained in the plant residue, where it gradually breaks down and is returned to the soil. These crops are also are known to suppress soil diseases such as verticillium wilt (important in potato production for example).

But Entz said seed costs for these species are typically higher than what farmers want to pay. Legumes and brassicas can also be seeded late season. "When it comes to mopping up soil N, brassicas (canola, mustard) are better than cereals. They simply use more nitrogen," Entz said. "Mustard is more heat-tolerant than canola and would do better in a late-seeded situation. There is also nothing wrong with seeding cool-season grasses like oats as a green manure. We have seeded green manures as late as end of July," Entz said. "Growth potential is limited of course."

In a classic example of Plan B thinking, hundreds of farmers in central and eastern Manitoba shifted acres out of soybeans or sunflowers and into canola. Most of them were happy with that last-minute decision.

"Typical planned crop rotations would involve a cereal-broadleaf rotation. So if you had planned to grow corn and the season did not look good, you could switch to another cereal like wheat, oats, or barley," says Gary Martens, an agronomy instructor with the University of Manitoba. "If you had planned sunflowers or soybeans you could switch to canola — which is what a lot of producers did in 2004."

Extension workers warn there are many factors to consider when building flexibility into a crop rotation:

• Herbicide history: have residual products been applied that limit your substitute cropping options? Is there a history of herbicide-tolerant crops, or herbicide-resistant weeds that could be worsened by your cropping choice?

In particular, watch how you use Group 2 products. It's become common for farmers to rely on this herbicide grouping to control broadleaf weeds in cereals and grassy weeds in

Continued on Next Page

SCOTT DAY PHOTOS

A last minute switch from corn to barley is what put feed in these bunkers this winter.

broadleaf crops. "Heavy use of Group 2's can restrict cropping options and lead to weed resistance," says Day. One alternative strategy is to move to an older, pre-seed product such as Edge.

Alternatively, some of the newer herbicide-tolerant crops have reduced the rotation-restricting residue problems farmers once experienced with atrazine and Treflan.

Check with your local agricultural representative or consult the herbicide rotation guide available through Manitoba Agriculture, Food and Rural Initiatives.

• Fertilizer management: How much more or less fertilizer will the substitute crop require? Do you need to make a cropping choice that avoids losing nitrogen through leaching?

• Moisture-use intensity: Is the crop you are substituting going to make full use of the available moisture?

• Seed and production rights: An increasing number of cropping choices are now managed as part of Identity Preserved production systems. More varieties are hybrids or are controlled through technology use agreements. In certain popular crop types, the seed supplies are so tightly managed, there may not be extra seed around late in the season.

Are you able to get seed and/or a production contract? Are you able to exit the contract you've already signed on crops you no longer want to attempt growing? Some growers say they keep some open-pollinated canola seed on hand — just in case.

Two time-worn standbys under Manitoba conditions continue to be barley and oats. They have short days to maturity, there's a wide range of marketing options for various quality scenarios and they are highly competitive crops that will help keep the weed seed bank in check.

"Just writing down a "Plan B" for different situations would be a great step forward," says Martens. "A plan for a normal year and a plan for a late spring would be the two I would start with."

Farmers have to decide for themselves whether it is worthwhile to buy seed for both options.

Rob Park, provincial oilseed specialist and a farmer near Carman, said having a Plan B could be as simple as working through some of the "what-if" scenarios ahead of the often-frenzied seeding season when it can be difficult to sort through the various options.

"A person with a plan always makes more money than someone who doesn't have a plan," Park said. "That's why we have long winters in Manitoba — so farmers are allowed to think these things out."

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