There were bumper yields in both 2003 and 2004, yet the years could hardly be more different

What Gives?

Record yields and record crop in

by Allan Dawson, Farmers' Independent Weekly

It's hard to make sense of the 2004 growing season. On one hand Manitoba farmers harvested record spring wheat and canola yields. On the other the Manitoba Crop Insurance Corporation (MCIC) expects to issue record claim payouts.

That's the kind of year it was: big yields for some crops, write-offs in others and lots of lower grading crops.

That there were crops to harvest at all surprised some. After all it was the coldest summer on record — perhaps the coldest since European settlement — with most areas receiving sufficient, if not too much moisture. In other words, almost ideal growing conditions for cool season crops like wheat and canola. That's why Manitoba farmers collectively harvested not just a bumper red spring wheat and canola crop, but a record — and the second in a row.

"In my books this was the summer that never was," says Calvin Gust, who farms near Bowsman in the Swan River Valley. "But it was certainly better than what we expected. We are thankful and fortunate that we got what we did get. It just seems to have turned around at the last second there and gave us some good weather and the yields were respectable."

Heat-loving crops like corn, sunflowers, soybeans and edible beans were generally low-yielding and in many cases written off by MCIC. But for the second consecutive year Manitoba's spring wheat and canola yielded on average 47 and 33 bushels an acre, respectively, according to Manitoba Management Plus Program data collected by MCIC. (See more yield data in this edition of *Yield Manitoba* or the Management Plus website www.mmpp.com)

The long-term average is 34 bushels an acre for wheat and 28 for canola. But the average yield only tells part of the story. MCIC reports 600,000 acres didn't get seeded because of wet soils. Those unplanted fields don't figure into the average yields.

Some farmers in northwestern Manitoba didn't harvest a bushel of canola after it froze August 20. That frost affected crops across much of the province. And wheat and canola quality was much lower than average due to slow maturity because of the cool temperatures, late seeding (although more crop was seeded earlier than you might think) and wet harvesting conditions.

As a result many farmers will still receive crop insurance payments despite bumper wheat and canola yields, says Herb Sulkers, MCIC's director of field operations.

Best wheat yield ever

"We went from our absolute best harvest (in 2003) to our absolute worst harvest so far as conditions went (in 2004)," says Beausejour-area farmer Andy Baker. "But two beautiful crops yield-wise."

In fact Baker's 2004 wheat was his highest yielding ever, averaging 65 bushels an acre, slightly better than the year before. Wheat in the Rural Municipality of Brokenhead averaged 49 bushels an acre in 2004 versus 55 in 2003.

"It was a helluva a crop," Baker says of the wheat. "It didn't matter where you were (in the field) it poured (in the hopper)."

The bad news is the 120,000 bushels Baker harvested will sell as No. 3 Canada Western Red Spring wheat rather than No. 1 or 2 and almost all of it had to be dried, adding to the expense.

"We dried wheat forever," he says. It just seemed like it would never end. Once it's over 20 per cent (moisture) it's slow; you're down to a couple of hundred bushels an hour."

On average between two-thirds and three-quarters of western Canadian spring wheat grades No. 1 and 2, with the rest grading No. 3, 4 or feed. This year only a third of the wheat will make the top-two grades, according to Bruce Burnett, the Canadian Wheat Board's director of weather and crop surveillance. He suspects that same pattern will apply to Manitoba.

Baker's oats, which weren't on his best land, yielded more than 100 bushels an acre and he was even more pleased with his flax, which averaged 34 bushels an acre, just in time to take advantage of good flax prices.

He also had a bumper canola crop of around 46 or 47 bushels an acre, well about the municipal average of 38.

Some crop still out

Baker still isn't finished harvesting; he has 180 acres of wheat still standing. The soil was just too wet to travel with machinery.

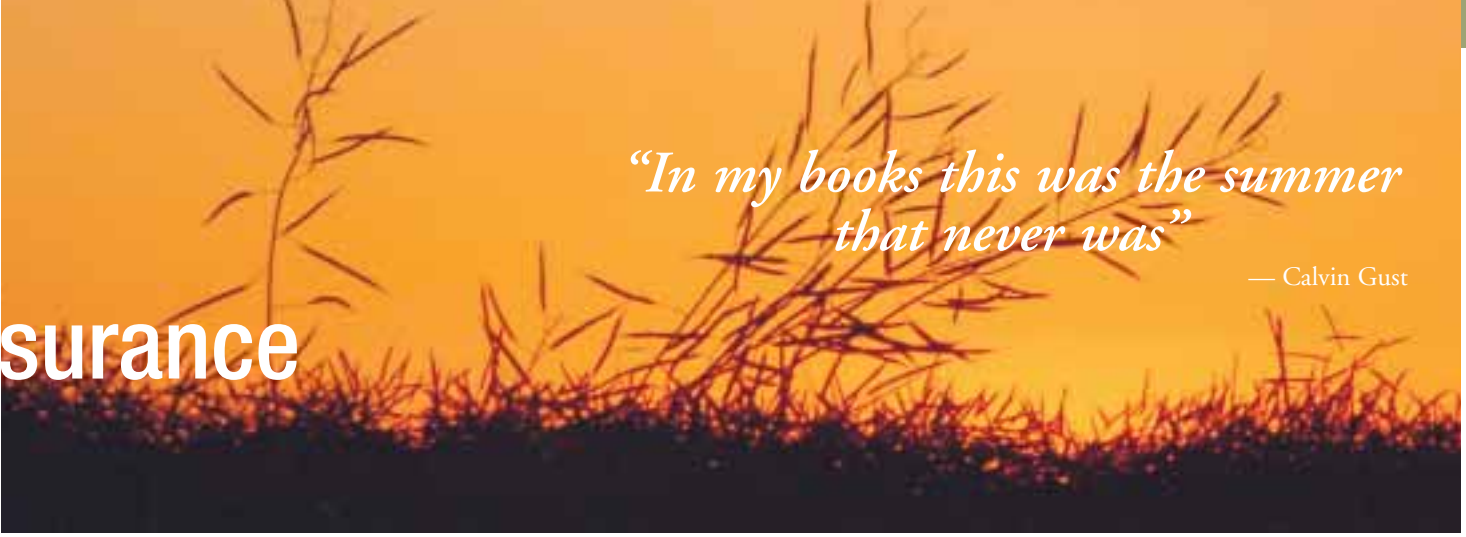
"It was unbelievable," says Baker. "I've never had conditions like that in the field."

That's not surprising given that area of Manitoba received 150 to 200 per cent of normal precipitation in August, according to statistics complied by Andy Nadler of Manitoba Agriculture, Food and Rural Initiatives.

Average yield per acre

Year	Location	Red Spring Wheat	2003	Arg. Canola	2003
2004	Manitoba	47	47	33	33
10 year avg	Manitoba	34		28	
2004	RM Minitonas	49	51	38	38
2004	RM Brokenhead	49	55	38	38
2004	RM Roland	59	65	40	41

Source: Management Plus, Manitoba Crop Insurance Corporation



"In my books this was the summer that never was"

— Calvin Gust

It was the same story on the other side of the province where Gust farms.

"It was the most dull dreary August I have ever seen," Gust says. "It was cool. We thought we'd never get a crop because there just was no summer weather. By about the middle of August I felt we weren't going to get a crop because it would freeze off."

Gust's wheat yielded around 45 bushels an acre, which is slightly above his long-term average. The average yield in the Rural Municipalities of Minitonas and Swan River were 49 bushels, down just a bit from 51 bushels an acre in 2003.

Fortunately, Gust expects to sell most of his wheat as No. 1 and 2. He has some No. 4 but hopes to sell it for a No. 3, even if he has to haul it further or hold it until the new crop year.

"We thought we'd never get summer," Gust says. "There were a few nice days in July, but August was terrible for the most part. We didn't get tons and tons of rain but we got little amounts every day."

Gust would never have guessed it but he was done harvesting by Thanksgiving.

His canola yielded below average — probably because of hail earlier in the growing season and perhaps a touch of frost in late August. Although canola yields and quality vary in his area, the average according to Management Plus, was 34 bushels an acre. That's down from 38 bushels last year but well above the long-term provincial average of 28.

Seeding dates

Contrary to popular belief, most of Manitoba's wheat and canola was planted relatively early, despite the cool spring and snowstorm May 11. Management Plus shows 75 per cent of wheat acres were seeded by the second week of May and 92 per cent was in before the end of May. (Don't forget though 600,000 acres of crop never got seeded because it was too wet and MCIC paid out $7 million in reseeding claims.)

Both Baker and Gust had their wheat in early. Baker had all his wheat and oats seeded prior to the May 11 snowstorm, which fortunately missed Gust's area.

The story was a little different for canola, but it's normally planted a bit later anyway. In 2004 26 per cent of canola acres were seeded by the second week of May versus more than 30 per cent the year previous.

However, 69 per cent of the canola was in the ground before the end of May. The big difference in 2004 was that 12 and nine per cent of the canola was seeded during the second and third weeks of June compared to well under five per cent in 2003.

Canola planted the second week of May yielded the best, averaging 37 bushels an acre, but the canola planted before May averaged almost as much at 36. The later the seeding, the lower the yield was, but even canola planted at the end of June still averaged 25 bushels an acre — almost as much as the long-term average.

Rob Park, an oilseed specialist with Manitoba Agriculture, Food and Rural Initiative, isn't surprised. Even late seeded canola yielded well because the cool, moist weather extended the flowering period to six weeks, rather than the more normal four weeks.

Late-seeded canola was more likely to be downgraded due to high chlorophyll content, however, green seed content was often lower than farmers had expected. Park estimates 20 to 25 per cent of the canola is high in chlorophyll so 75 to 80 per cent of crop is grading No. 1 or close to it.

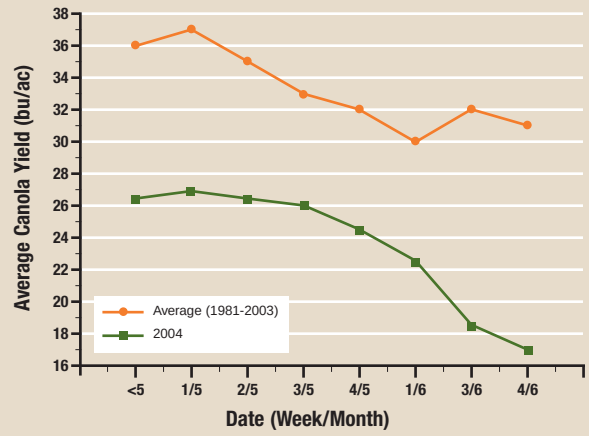
It turns out that even after a sub-lethal frost the enzymes that clear the chlorophyll will continue to work so long as the seed moisture content is above 20 or 25 per cent, says Park.

In retrospect the poor harvest weather farmers endured probably helped to reduce the green content.

"If it had of turned warm and dry and sunny (after the frost) the green would've probably been locked in," says Park.

This year's seeding date data reinforces data from the past: seeding wheat early results in higher yields. For example, wheat seeded before May averaged 53 bushels an acre and it declined from there. Wheat seeded at the end of June averaged 21 bushels, while wheat seeded the second week of June averaged 35, which is one bushel an acre above the long-term average.

Comparison of canola yields at various seeding dates
Manitoba - 2004 vs Average



TOM NEUFELD PHOTOS

For the first time ever Roland-area Bob Bartley didn't combine any corn. What was shaping up to be a good yield crop had to be knocked down with the harrows and then worked down because the cobs went mouldy.

Farmer goes from best to worse

corn yield

What a difference a year makes

by Allan Dawson, Farmers's Independent weekly

All together Roland farmers Bob Bartley and his dad Bruce have grown corn for 41 years; 2003 was their best corn crop ever and 2004 was the worst.

For the first time ever the Bartleys never combined a bit of corn, says Bob. Instead he knocked it all down with harrows and then worked it back into the soil like most other Manitoba grain corn growers.

Bartley says his corn produced a lot of seed, but it went mouldy and couldn't be fed to livestock. Some cobs looked fine on the outside but were mouldy on the inside. Crop insurance wrote off the Bartley's corn crop.

"You're not very happy harrowing down your crop but we knew from previous experience that it was the only option so we didn't shed many tears," says Bartley.

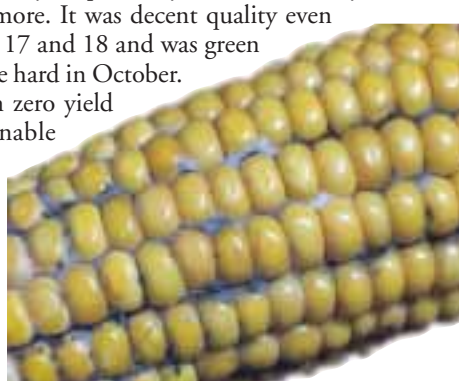
His other crops faired better. Canola yielded well and the quality is good. The wheat yielded well too, but poor harvest weather hurt the grade.

In 2003 Bartley harvested big wheat and canola crops and the quality was excellent. In the R. M. of Roland spring wheat and canola averaged 64.7 and 41 bushels an acre in 2003, compared to 59 and 40 in 2004, according to Management Plus data.

Bartley was pleasantly surprised by his flax, which yielded 20 bushels an acre or more. It was decent quality even though seeded June 17 and 18 and was green as grass when it froze hard in October.

"I had figured on zero yield but it was reasonable crop and prices were reasonable too," he says.

"We're thankful for what we got. It could have been a lot worse and others did have it a lot worse."



Bob Bartley's mouldy corn.

Average wheat quality not as bad as first thought

by Allan Dawson, Farmers's Independent weekly

Manitoba's wheat and canola quality suffered in 2004 following a cool summer and wet harvest, but preliminary data collected by the Canadian Grain Commission suggests wheat quality might not be as bad, on average, as first thought.

For example, 34 per cent of Nos. 1, 2, 3 and 4 Canada Western Red Spring wheat from Manitoba delivered to an export terminal between August 1, 2004 and January 11, 2005 graded No. 1. The 10-year average is 31.4 per cent. Forty, 21.4 and 4.0 per cent graded No. 2, 3 and 4, respectively, compared to the 10-year average of 58.6, 9.7 and 0.2 per cent.

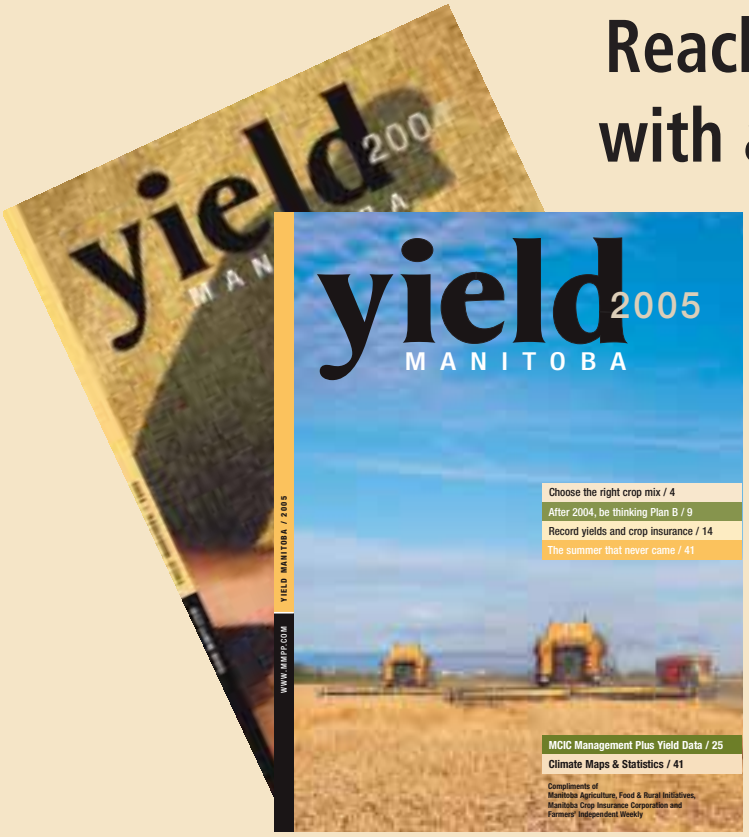
This crop year, as of January 11, 74 per cent of Manitoba's delivered spring wheat was grading No. 1 and 2, compared to the 10-year average of 90 per cent.

On average just 10 per cent of Manitoba's CWRS wheat grades No. 3 and 4; this year those two grades accounted for 25 per cent of the wheat delivered as of January 11.

During the first half of the crop year, in proportional terms, farmers delivered about the same amount of No. 1 wheat as average, but a lot more No. 2 and a lot more Nos. 3 and 4.

It will be interesting to see if the trend holds for the rest of the crop year, or whether a greater or lesser proportion of the wheat will be in the lower grades.

Canola grades until January 11 fit more with what was expected. Up until then, 62 and 38 per cent of Manitoba's canola had graded No. 1 and 2, respectively versus the 10-year average of 86 and 14 per cent.



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