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## Pulse producers need to prepare to change: broker

**Murray Lyons**

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Producers of specialty crops, like pulses, have to prepare to change their seeding plans throughout the winter as they look for a profitable crop, says outspoken special crop broker Larry Weber.

As well, farmers can't ignore agronomic reality, where fall and winter moisture is too plentiful, like the conditions which preceded the drought-ridden 2002 crop, says the president of Saskatoon-based Weber Commodities Ltd.

Weber says based on his company's website, which tracks the locations of website visitors, "Fall subsoil moisture is almost non-existent," he said.

Weber is skeptical about early predictions for 2004, made by some economic forecasters, which indicate Saskatchewan will have an average crop.

"You can't have back to back to back drought and think you're going to have an average crop. We have some dangerous sub-soil moisture conditions facing us."

Weber's remarks were echoed by Shawn Buhr, of Lucky Lake, the chair of the Saskatchewan Pulse Growers board. He said moisture is his biggest concern. His farm falls outside his region's irrigation system.

"We've suffered through three consecutive droughts on our farm," he said.

Weber says farmers should again have a strategy to deal with insects. Aphids proved a big problem for pulse producers last year, as did grasshoppers, which hit all field crops hard.

"We had some guys spraying their lentils and other crops three or four times," Weber said. "It was a drain on profitability."

He says the grasshopper prediction map, published last winter, was extremely accurate and conditions are right for grasshopper infestations to appear in the areas marked on this winter's Saskatchewan Agriculture grasshopper map.

Weber said producers have to pay attention to world market signals in addition to planning for poor moisture and insects. The first major USDA report on the American crop size released last Sunday has already had an effect on seeding plans, because of the price hikes in beans and corn it triggered.

"Watch the market, as seeding intentions are not going to be nailed down anytime soon," Weber advised.

Murad Al-Katib, the president of Saskcan Pulse Trading, which built an \$11 million splitting facility for red lentils just outside Regina last year, says there are signs Saskatchewan pulse acreage is becoming more stable, except for chick peas.

The explosion in chick pea acreage, which reached nearly a million acres in the late 1990s, has

retreated to about a tenth of that because of chronic problems with the Ascochyta blight.

Al-Katib said the huge expansion and then contraction of chick pea acreage has contributed to the view of Saskatchewan's pulse crop industry as being an inconsistent supplier. But he says there are signs that situation is changing, as lentils become a regular part of the crop rotation for many producers.

One of the biggest problems facing both producers and processors in the past year has been the rising dollar.

Al-Katib pointed out that growers of red lentils are getting one cent per pound less than they did in March of last year, but the cost to offshore buyers is up a half a cent because of the rising Canadian dollar.

One bright spot for lentil growers on the horizon is a new variety, released by BASF Canada -- working in partnership with the Saskatchewan Pulse Growers and the University of Saskatchewan Crop Development Centre -- which offers better weed control options.

The seed should be available commercially by 2006 and incorporates a technology that BASF brands as the Clearfield system.

It marks the first time lentils can be sprayed for weeds during the growing season, using the BASF Odyssey brand of herbicide.

Buhr says it's an important development because it gives farmers control of both broadleaf and grassy weeds. A bonus in world markets is the new variety of lentil is not considered a genetically modified organism by other countries.

The Clearfield system uses the process of metagenesis, which uses either chemicals or radiation to produce a DNA mutation in a seed that will give it resistance to a particular herbicide. By contrast, genetically modified organisms such as Roundup Ready technology insert a gene from another organism to achieve herbicide resistance.

Metagenesis has been used since the 1950s and is considered a traditional crop breeding, too, says Graham Scoles, the associate dean of research at the U of S college of agriculture.

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