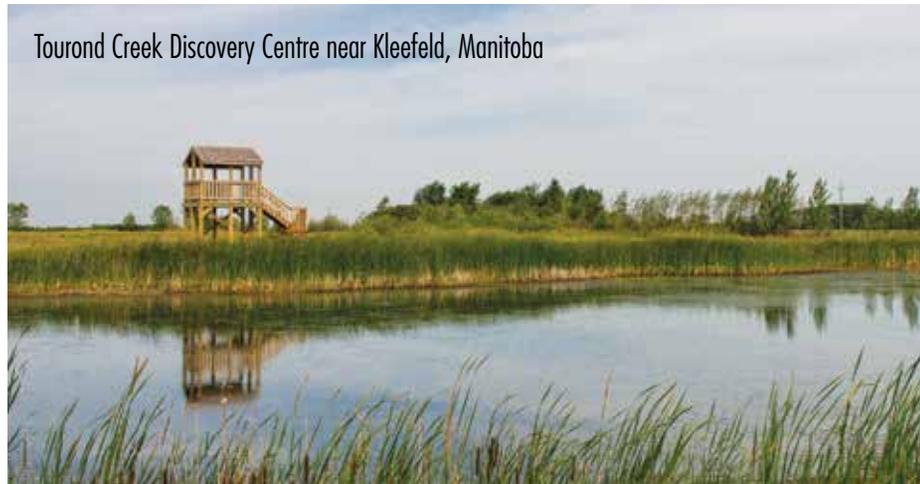


Manitoba's ag-weather network critical to farm decisions



Tourond Creek Discovery Centre near Kleefeld, Manitoba

Photo by SRCCD.

Farms are affected by the weather more than nearly any other business. An early frost, a humid spring, unusually high rainfall or even steady winds carrying insects can directly affect a farm's bottom line. That is why, the ag-weather program to improve weather monitoring, encourage partnerships and help decision-making is so important.

Area-specific information essential

Mike Wroblewski, meteorologist with Manitoba Agriculture, Food and Rural Development's ag-weather program says that in the late 1980s, meteorologists' reliance on weather data shifted from

being collected at physical weather stations, to being provided by satellites, radar and computer models. The change hurt Manitoba farmers who were not able to get accurate weather data for their specific area, but instead could only see general weather reports for their regions.

"Generally the satellite data allowed us to see what was happening in all areas of the country, but farmers needed more area-specific information to make farming decisions," says Wroblewski.

Thanks to the ag-weather program, today there are 50 weather stations in Manitoba which measure air temperature, rainfall, wind speed and more. All weather data is available online in near real-time.

Initial funding for the program came from the Agri-Food Research and Development

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Initiative (ARDI), and the network's expansion is now continuing with support from *Growing Forward 2*. In fact, the stations recently received funding through *Growing Forward 2* to be retrofitted with all year precipitation monitoring so they will track snowfall as well as rainfall.

Benefiting rural Manitoba

Beyond just benefiting farmers, the weather stations are a fixture in small communities and provide valuable information to area residents.

At one site close to Kleefeld, Manitoba, the weather station has become an educational tool for students and community members. Tourond Creek Discovery Centre (TCDC) sits on top of the decommissioned Kleefeld Waste Disposal Site. With the help of many partners, the 80-acre site was turned into an outdoor classroom.

"The weather station is one of six eco-stops along our interpretive trail," says Jodi Goerzen, district manager at Seine-Rat River Conservation District and one of the partners that made the outdoor classroom a reality. "After students have been to the site they have a real appreciation for how weather data is collected."

She says that in the agricultural region around Kleefeld, weather data is extremely important. Before the weather station came to the area, the closest weather data came from Emerson or from Winnipeg.

Crop reports provided to farmers

Wroblewski explained there are many microclimates in Manitoba which are not accurately reflected in general weather models, but are captured by on-site weather stations. Most farmers are now able to get a specific weather report for their area instead of a general overview.

"The main benefit is the network provides near real-time, quality controlled data to farmers during the growing season," says Wroblewski. "We publicly provide value-added products such as risk maps for Fusarium disease in wheat so farmers can see when the risk is high and they need to spray."

Other important crop reports like the potato late blight forecast and wheat midge emergence map rely on the data provided by the ag-weather network. ■

New insurance policy *has legs* with livestock producers

Since launching last spring, more than 600 Manitoban producers have signed up for the Western Livestock Price Insurance Program (WLPPI) and have taken out more than 400 policies to manage the risk of market drops.

The four-year pilot program was launched with the support of *Growing Forward 2's* AgriRisk Initiatives—Administrative Capacity Building as an answer for producers who, up until now, have had few options to manage the risk of a decline in the price of their livestock. As a joint initiative between the four western provinces, the program is intended to provide easily accessible price protection at prices relevant to local market conditions

"Market prices for hogs and cattle are very volatile. The high market prices that we sometimes see will go down—that's just a fact of business," says Jason Dobbin, livestock price insurance co-ordinator with Manitoba Agricultural Services Corporation (MASC).

Producers feel assured and prepared for market drops

Doug Hodgins, who has been producing cattle since he was 17-years-old, took out policies on his calves and yearlings to feel secure.

"Just like any other insurance we take out in life, you hope you never have to use it. But having it there helps me sleep at night."

Hodgins, whose farm is between Holland and Austin near Spruce Woods National Park, decided to build up his cattle herd when Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) hit Manitoba in the spring of 2003.

"We never thought about BSE coming in, but it did and it set us all back. You never see it coming, but if something like that were to happen again, the extra cost is a no-brainer," Hodgins says.

The security Hodgins feels from using the program is something echoed by cattle producers across the province.

"This is something the livestock industry in Manitoba has been needing for quite some time, and we're pleased the government is able to offer this program to our producers as an option to insure their cattle and protect themselves against unexpected circumstances," says Heinz Reimer, president of Manitoba Beef Producers.

Program a good safety net for young and new producers

Because it's a locked-in minimum price, Dobbin says that the insurance program will help to encourage young people to get into the livestock sector.

"They can go to the bank and say they have guaranteed income and be able to apply for loans and the things you need when getting into a business. Over the past few years our herds and number of cattle producers have not been expanding. This program will help turn that around and encourage growth," he says. ■

