

Impacts of weather felt in Holland Marsh

By Avia Eek

When your livelihood is derived from agriculture, there is no such thing as a 'normal' or 'average' year. From one year to the next, you will have to deal with varying challenges and food and farming certainly isn't the 'same old, same old' from one year to the next. We use best farm, and best management practices, as much as you are able to when your business partner is Mother Nature! 2016 has certainly proven to be a particular challenge! Our spring started out cooler than we would have liked, given that we had transplant onions to plant. Then, as is usually the case, around May/June, the Holland Marsh experienced wind storms (think of a blizzard in the winter, except with dirt). The ground is light, having been 'worked' in order to plant our seasonal crops. Some farmers will plant cover crop 'windrows' to protect their crops until the roots are established in these crops, but there is still that small window when the wind can blow through, picking up the dirt, seeds etc., requiring re-seeding.

Our farmers dealt with damaging winds from the northwest for 2.5 days, which dried out small seedlings (dependant on the size), and various other crops died as a result of wind damage. A lack of precipitation compounded matters.

Some farmers irrigate their fields prior to seeding, if the field is really, really dry. Some will wait to irrigate until after they have seeded in order for the worked up soil holding the seeds to form a 'crust,' which mitigates wind damage by holding the soil together, essentially packing it. Either way, choosing to irrigate pre- or post- seeding, adds to input costs. Irrigation systems require the use of pumps to pump the water from the river or canal to our headers, pipes or reels. Pumps require fuel and tractors, and lots of man hours for optimum results.

Our Holland Marsh farmers have important partners, without which, would make what we do much more difficult. We have our Muck Crops Research Station, University of Guelph, who work with our farmers from the science end of things providing us with important information about soil, bugs, crop protection, integrated pest management, field scouting, disease, which varieties of seeds grow best in our organic based soil, etc. Another very important partner is the Holland Marsh Drainage System Joint Municipal Services Board, folks comprised of the mayor and a councillor from each of King Township and Town of Bradford West Gwillimbury, two farmer representatives from each municipality, and a member at large who provide direction to the drainage superintendent. It should be noted that the drainage system in the Holland Marsh is unique in all of Ontario, and contributes to the importance of this Specialty Crop Area, and our ability to provide locally grown produce, which is world renown. There are a number of pump houses within the polders that control the flow of water in and out of the Holland Marsh from Lake Simcoe. During this lengthy drought, the likes of which we have not seen in a couple of decades, the pump houses are checked twice daily controlling the flow based on the needs of our farmers.

The drought conditions this year have been incredibly hard on crops, and our farmers, who have been spending 19 hours a day trying to keep the crops alive. The extreme heat, and lack of rain have contributed to seedlings burning off. Some of our farmers have had to re-seed part fields due to burn off. The weather has also reduced the effectiveness of crop protection which directly relates to an increase in weeds (they seem to be flourishing this year). Under normal weather conditions, fields are hand-weeded at least 4-5 times throughout the growing season. No, we are not organic farmers, but spraying less is less stressful for the plants, and reduces our crop protection costs. Weeds must be removed from fields, as they compete with our field crops for nutrients, and provide a haven for pests (which leads to the need for crop protection. Fields are scouted regularly, and are only sprayed when thresholds are reached). As well, when weeds are present, it increases the chance of disease. This year, to date, we have, on our farm alone, increased our labour costs for additional handweeding by \$14,000 ??that's just one cost!

Some crops, like onions, may experience a size reduction. The chain stores have a 'standard' that they prefer for consumers. Based on the conversations I've had with folks, most consumers prefer smaller onions. Don't be shy about sharing your preference for smaller produce with your local grocer! Other crops, like carrots, may experience length differences. This is good, as there's a standard for length too. Those that have survived the heat, as a result of irrigation. You see, in a dry year the tap root of the carrot will seek water, growing downward, creating a longer carrot. We'll find out at harvest this fall!

A question many folks are asking is 'how will this drought impact food prices? Or will it? What are your farm losses??' These are great questions.

It's really difficult to say what, if any, food price increases will occur. While we all talk about buying local, shopping local, and supporting local agriculture, the reality is most of our Holland Marsh Farmers (except for some of the farmers' market growers) are commercial growers, and the prices we get paid depend on the global market pricing, not what it actually costs us to grow the food,

but what the prices are based on our international trading partners. So, back to the question will food prices go up??That depends on whether there is ample supply of produce, including that provided by our trading partners.

What are farms' losses? I would be able to sit down and figure out the increases of labour, fuel, transplants, seed, crop insurance, crop protection etc., to date based on actual numbers, but it isn't really until next April when we will be able to figure what the actual losses are based on market value.