

*Pask Farms Ltd.*

Box 40  
Atwater, SK  
S0A 0C0

# *Pask Farms Ltd.*

## Spring Newsletter 2012

• [murray@paskfarms.com](mailto:murray@paskfarms.com)

• [craig@paskfarms.com](mailto:craig@paskfarms.com)

**Phone:**

306-745-2571

**Fax:**

306-745-2564

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### Hope for an Early Spring:

The first week of April had farmers in an optimistic mood. It looked like we might get an early spring, with fields drier than the last couple of years. There would be time to get some ruts filled in, maybe even get some alfalfa fields burnt. But the cold, snowy, wet weather the second week has set those plans back a bit. This is a good time to review the alfalfa seed / leafcutter bee situation, and firm



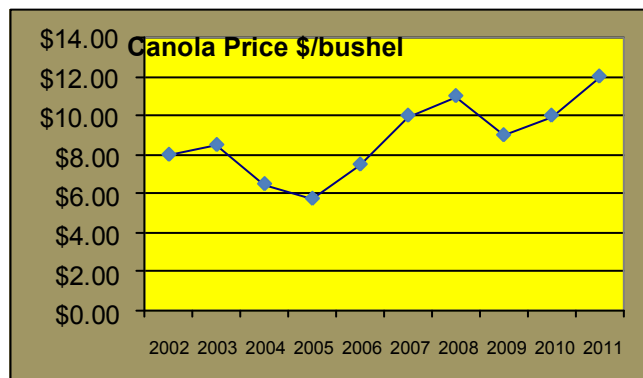
### Contract Settlements and New Contracts:

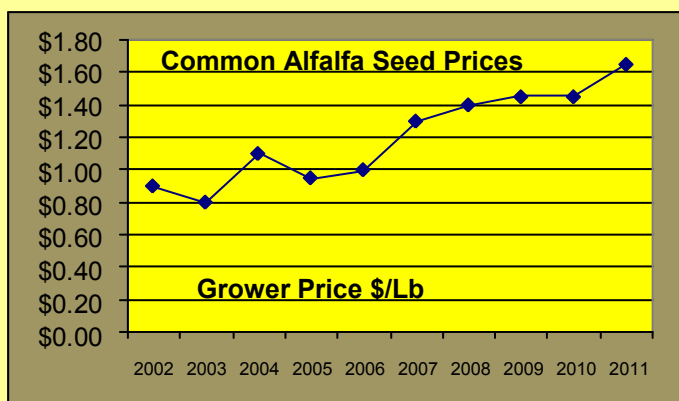
The prices we paid this spring for our contract production alfalfa seed are up over the 2011 prices. We paid \$1.65 per pound for most of the common seed we bought. This means a contract paying common + \$.20, paid you about \$1.85 net in your pocket. This compares favorably with the USA grower settlements of \$2.00 per pound less all their deductions. High dockages continue to be a problem and are mostly a reflection of the poor alfalfa seed production we've had the past few years. We're very fortunate that we do not have to pay a dockage disposal fee, as do the growers in the USA. A more detailed discussion on what increases dockage, and what you can do to reduce your dockage is included in this mailing. Since dockage involves weeds, it also includes quite a bit of information on weed control.

Contracts for planting this spring are a bit higher again, approaching \$.30 per pound over common, depending on quality, with decent minimums. Some good certified growers are opting to grow "common" seed, often planting a variety that they feel will yield seed in wet conditions. The ever higher markets have dulled us from the reality that what goes up, usually comes down. There have been a number of times when common seed crashed and suddenly the certified production was paying twice the price of common. This time things look different, but time will tell if we're making the right choices.

### Canola and Commodity Crop Prices:

Canola is the money maker on most farms in Western Canada. Looking at canola prices over the last ten years, we see that prices were at \$8.00 per bushel, dipped down to \$6.00, but have risen to \$12 and beyond. This is a near doubling in price over that time, but most farmers would argue their costs have doubled in that time as well.



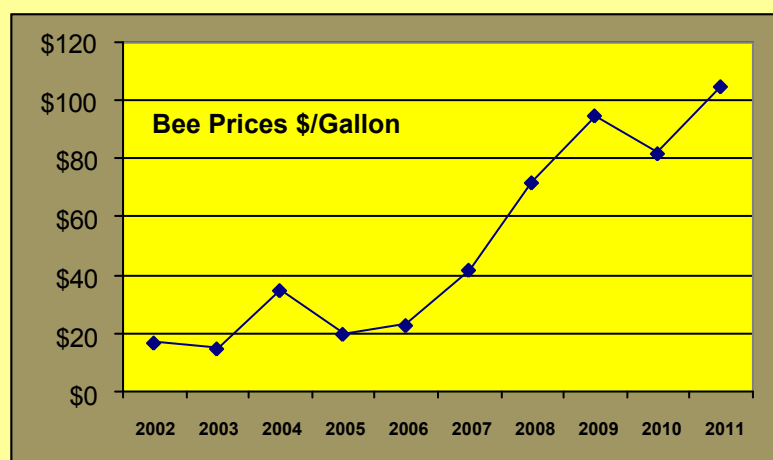


## Alfalfa Seed Prices:

Looking at common alfalfa seed prices paid to the grower, we see the price increased gradually from \$1.00 per pound to \$1.65 per pound over the last ten years. Both acres and yields are down, meaning total alfalfa seed production has really dropped. The fact that prices have only increased gradually is an indication that less alfalfa hay is being planted in Canada and the USA.

## Bee Prices:

Over the same period, bee prices have jumped from \$20 per gallon to \$100 per gallon. This amazing run up in the bee price has been driven by a massive cutback in leafcutter bee production in Saskatchewan, the province that has the best track record on bee increase. At the same time, alternative crop pollination, primarily hybrid canola seed production, has increased demand for leafcutter bees.



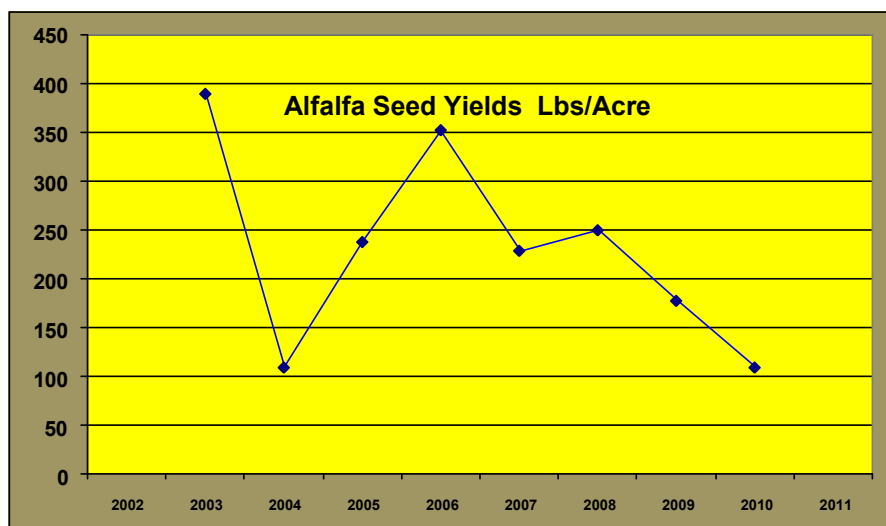
## Focus On Yield – Both Seed and Bees:



To make money growing alfalfa seed, it is really important to focus on increasing yields of both bees and seed. Reducing dockage and increasing prices are important, but matter little if you have a poor crop. This chart shows the average alfalfa seed yield per acre from all our contract production, including our own farm, for the past number of years. The yield trend is down, and it reflects that the "right" weather is very important to alfalfa seed production. Alfalfa seed has experienced poor yields and moderate price increases. Canola has benefited from improved yields, better prices and wet, cool weather. No wonder everyone has quit growing alfalfa seed!

Yet your memory tells you that alfalfa seed can make money.

This past year we had a number of growers getting 300 lbs/acre, with the top fields over 500 lbs/acre. At \$1.85 per pound, the seed revenue was \$600 per acre or more. These same growers tend to be the ones using 3 gallons of bees and doubled them. Selling those extra 3 gallons at \$110 per gallon gave them another \$300 per acre. This makes the return \$900 per acre, and **some growers had fields that returned well over \$1,000 per acre.**



# Increasing Seed Yields:

We grow alfalfa seed on our farm. We know this is a hard crop to grow. It requires a level of management and attention to detail much greater is needed to grow commodity crops. A lot of things can go wrong between when the alfalfa breaks ground and when we finally deliver the seed to market. It is easy to give up. A late flush of weeds, another round of plant bugs, a rainy start to July - all make it hard to continue to chase the crop. Keith Head often says that "*We plan to fail*". As soon as something goes wrong, we give up and let nature take its course.

The plan is easily stated, but getting the perfect outcome is pretty hard.

- start with a clean, uniform stand
- control weeds (check out the chart on the last page of our dockage leaflet)
- control plant diseases
- control bugs
- use lots of bees
- pull or spray sweet clover
- harvest in a timely fashion
- make sure the seed doesn't heat in storage



## Bigger Bee Yields:

Many of you remember the good old days, when we often had a 3x bee increase. What happened?

The weather has played a big role. We need the alfalfa to flower early, July and August need to be hot and dry. That hasn't happened lately.

We used to have some pretty weedy fields, and some of those weeds were very helpful to the bees. A field full of wild buckwheat is almost a guarantee for a 3x bee increase. Unfortunately weeds like Canada thistle, sow thistle, wild oats, and sweet clover do us no good at all. We can't figure out how to only grow "good" weeds.

We think the bees need something besides alfalfa flowers and leaves. As our fields got bigger and cleaner, there was more bee drift to the shelters on the field perimeter. Seed yields in the center of the field suffered. There were too many bees in the perimeter shelters. These extra bees that drifted in, fought over the available tunnels, and we had more pollen balls. Our data shows that planting tame buckwheat around each shelter for leaf material helps keep the bees where we put them. That results in more even pollination on the crop, and more even fill on the bee boxes. Our bee production check list is:

- Don't kill them in the incubator, venting and cooling never hurts
- Make sure you have enough blossom when you release the bees
- Get them out of the trays and working in the field without killing more bees
- Make sure they have some other plants nearby that they like
- Some of the things they like include tame and wild buckwheat, wild rose, wolf willow, and canola petals
- Give the females enough tunnels to minimize bee confusion
- Use lots of bees – more bees usually result in more seed





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Box 40  
Atwater, Sk.  
S0A 0C0

Phone: 306-745-2571

Fax: 306-745-2564

Craig@paskfarms.com

Murray@paskfarms.com



## Wisdom From the Ages:

Some things never change. Most of you are running farm businesses with employees. This past winter, all the farm press had articles on farm employment issues. Here is a quote from "Agriculture for High Schools, published in 1949", which means it was written over 60 years ago.

*"The profitable employment of labor is one of the most troublesome problems confronting the farmer-manager. Sound judgment should be exercised in selecting men and in directing them, in order to avoid waste of time and effort. The most economical employment of labor demands a farming system that distributes the work evenly throughout the entire year."*

Good advice, but what has this got to do with alfalfa seed and leafcutter bees? Just remember that our leafcutter bees help keep our summer farm staff employed for part of the winter.

Time to break out the gloves, and grow the best crop ever!

*Craig Newton*

*Murray Pask*

