

Soybean acres are here to stay

By Harry Siemens

Mr. Bean aka Dennis Lange, Industry Development Specialist-Pulses told a Westman Opportunities Leadership Group workshop in Brandon recently the history of soybean production in Manitoba and Saskatchewan and the future.

Lange said it is one thing to tell Manitoba growers will hit 3 million acres by such a date, but often those same people don't consider the challenges. That might drop those acres back. Back in 2000, Manitoba grew around 20,000 acres of soybeans; most were conventional soybeans because the Roundup Ready technology didn't come into play until about 2003 when growers first planted the first Roundup Ready soybean varieties suited to their growing region. "Those varieties a little bit too short for North Dakota, but a little bit too long for Manitoba, and didn't have a great fit. We could grow them. Fields were okay. We were looking, roughly, in that 30-bushel range, so still okay, but tiny acres," he said.

In 2004, a challenging year for soybean production in Manitoba, no heat, and very few heat units. Adding in the frost on August 20 the average yield only 8 bushels an acre. In 2005, a very similar spring, but a better growing season and yields 21 bushels per acre range. Still not high, but started moving along.

The year 2011 proved a daunting year with July and August very dry, and soybeans don't like it dry during that period, and yielded 26 bushels an acre.

Then the significant milestone reached in 2013, a million acres in Manitoba breaking a record for yield at 39 bushels an acre that year. Very similar return in 2015, lots more acres, again 39 bushels an acre. "We move into 2016, lots of rainfall in July and August and the soybean yield last year 42 bushels an acre," said Lange. "If you look at a ten year average, and a ten year average is sitting at about 35 bushels an acre. We got rid of the '04, '05 in that ten year average, so it makes those numbers look a little better. And the five-year average is sitting at 38 bushels an acre."

In 2017, based on just over 2.26 million acres planted in Manitoba, his projection right now is for about 34 bushels an acre. Less than last year, just because of how dry it was. There's quite a range.

"Pretty much every grower I talk to, whether it's out west or in the valley, you ask them what their yields were like, and the same growers will say it's anywhere from, say, 25 to 45 bushels an acre. So, again, still a pretty good number, but with the dry conditions that we saw last year, if it wasn't for the fact that we had a lot of moisture last year, this number might be even lower," he said. "For 2016, roughly about 1.8 million metric ton production of soybeans in Manitoba." Taking into consideration farmers planted 2.26 million acres in 2017 and the dryness reduced yields from 2016, Lange projects 2018 Manitoba soybean acres to level in that two million acre range.

While farmers in the Red River Valley grew most of the soybeans several years ago, the area keeps growing and even shifting.

He divided Manitoba into traditional non-traditional areas meaning the area where farmers first started to grow soybeans drawing a line from Portage la Prairie down to Morden, across the Ontario border, in 2016, that represented about 55 per cent of the soybean acres in Manitoba. That would mean, roughly, 45 per cent for the rest of Manitoba.

In 2011, that traditional area was 95 per cent of the acres and only 5 percent out west, and he expects 2017 to be an even 50-50 split adding the biggest reason is the development of the new varieties. The early maturing varieties have helped growers in the western side of the province grow soybeans successfully and no killing frost in seven years and that also plays into it.

Lange said one challenge is with only two per cent non-GMO soybeans; new growers have run into the volunteer Roundup Ready issue is here. So, they have to make changes to their cropping plans to some degree, and others, have to watch rotation and chemical history. “So, if you know you have a Roundup Ready problem in your field from past growing canola, you're going to have to take care of that with new chemistry. So, that's been a bit of a challenge for some growers,” he said.

Various diseases that are only now starting to show up can also slow the soybean acres, especially for new growers excited about what they see across the road from existing growers. When expanding into non-traditional areas, maturity can also be an issue.

“That can be a concern maybe, they're not quite familiar with the varieties they need to grow. But keep on talking of the varieties to make sure that what you're choosing for your region is suited and you're not going to run into a problem like this where you get all these immature beans in there,” Lange said.

Based on mass harvest production numbers, Manitoba's are typically in that 9.5, 9.6 million acre range.

“If we have 3 million acres of canola, 3 million acres of soybeans, and 2.5, 3 million acres of wheat, it doesn't leave a lot of room for much else, does it,” he said.

Combine 2.5 to 3 million acres in Manitoba, and a million acres in Saskatchewan means about four million acres of soybeans in these two provinces with more increased potentially in Saskatchewan.