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Alberta Farmers Given New Option for Protecting Crops as Hail Season Approaches

AFSC Provides Online Hail Coverage for More Immediate Access

With spring seeding nearly finished across most of Alberta and another hail season on the horizon, Alberta's provincial crop insurer is giving farmers an alternative way to protect their crops from Mother Nature's white combine.

"We're making Straight Hail insurance available online this spring so farmers have more immediate access to hail protection around the clock. They can still purchase hail coverage through AFSC offices and hail agents, but online access is something producers have been asking us for," says Lorelei Hulston, Provincial Insurance Manager with Agriculture Financial Services Corporation (AFSC), the provincial Crown Corporation that provides the majority of hail insurance in Alberta on behalf of the provincial government.

Around the Clock

"So if it's late on Saturday night and they hear a weather forecast that concerns them, now they can turn on their home computer and access hail coverage that takes effect Sunday at noon. If they had to wait until Monday to come into one of our offices, their coverage wouldn't be in effect until Tuesday at noon, and by then it could be too late."

In a province known for its high hail risk, this is an important change, says Hulston. "It's especially important for farmers who take a wait-and-see approach with hail. While some producers take out hail coverage with their crop insurance in April or as soon as they finish seeding, others wait to see how their crops progress before making a decision. Once they're satisfied their crops are off to a good start, and they decide to insure for hail, they usually want to act quickly, before a storm rolls through," says Hulston.

The Risk of Hail

The risk of hail this year will depend partly on how much more it rains in the weeks ahead, says Dan Kulak, an Environment Canada meteorologist in Edmonton. The more saturated the soil becomes, the more hailstorm activity farmers could see as that moisture evaporates and feeds storm clouds, says Kulak, noting hail season generally runs from late May to September.

"It's a love-hate relationship between crops and storms, because we usually need the rain but hail often comes with it," says Geoff Strong, an atmospheric scientist and adjunct professor at

the University of Alberta. He points out less rain will typically mean less hail because surface moisture is a key ingredient in the formation of hailstorms.

However, wet or dry, hail is always a threat during the growing season in Alberta, primarily because of our geography and weather patterns, says Kulak. He explains dry air flows across the mountains and converges with warm, humid air that often drifts in from far south, initiating severe storms that can produce hail.

AFSC paid out more than \$170 million in hail insurance claims across the province last year through its Straight Hail program and the Hail Endorsement rider on crop insurance. "It was our third highest payout in the last 10 years despite the dry conditions," says Hulston. The bulk of the damage came from a series of intense August long weekend storms that cut a wide swath from north of Olds down to Milk River. There was also widespread crop damage caused by a number of smaller isolated storms across the province.

Activation Code "A Must"

"Hail is so unpredictable," says Hulston. "That's why we're providing 24/7 access to hail insurance online this year." She reminds producers before they can purchase online coverage, they must first contact AFSC for an activation code. "The code gives them access to the Straight Hail website. Without it, they won't be able to log on. It's a security feature." She says producers who buy coverage online will get a two per cent premium discount in addition to the two per cent they receive if they pay early, and they can use their credit card for payment.

"The website is simple and user friendly. Even clients with slower Internet connections shouldn't have any difficulty," she says. "More and more farmers are becoming technology savvy and want to take care of their crop insurance needs at their own convenience rather than work around our schedule." For more information about the new online hail insurance option, producers can contact their nearest AFSC office or the AFSC Call Centre at 1-877-899-2372.