For most farmers it was a bust, but those in the northwest enjoyed bumper crops.

A look back at the 2005 growing season

by Allan Dawson, Farmers' Independent Weekly

For many Manitoba farmers 2005 was their worst crop ever, but for a lucky few it was their best.

Bowsman-area farmer Calvin Gust was among the lucky ones. Andy Baker, who farms near Beausejour was not. Unfortunately, Baker has a lot of company and record crop insurance payments bear that out. Crop insurance claims for 2005 had already exceeded $230 million by early January, on the way to an estimated total of $300 million or more, according to Herb Sulkers, director of crop insurance field operations for the Manitoba Agricultural Services Corporation. That's up more than 50 per cent from the previous record of $197.7 million in 2004.

That was the coldest summer on record, making many think that it couldn't get any worse.The previous summer was the coldest on record, which was especially tough on heat-loving crops such as corn, sunflowers and soybeans. A wet fall in 2004 also wreaked havoc with harvest, especially in the Red River Valley.

Little did farmers there know it would only get wetter. During May, June and July, most of agro-Manitoba received 150 to 200 per cent of normal rainfall, said Bruce Burnett, the Canadian Wheat Board's director of weather and crop surveillance.

Morris normally gets about 222 mm (8.7 inches) of rain between May and the end of July; this year it received more than 406.6 mm (16 inches). In fact it was so wet last spring 1.5 million acres of land didn't get planted and crop insurance wrote off 800,000 acres of crop that just couldn't recover. Ironically, later in the growing season many areas could have used a rain to help the shallow-rooted crops that did survive.

"First it was too wet, then it was too dry," Sulkers said. "It was a double whammy."

While the Red River Valley suffered the most crop damage based on crop insurance yield data available online through Management Plus (www.mmpp.com), most of agro-Manitoba was deluged early in the growing season. Based on rainfall recorded by *Farmers' Independent Weekly* subscribers, Rivers in western Manitoba, had the biggest single rain at just a little more than 120 mm (almost five inches) June 1. The same day Melita, in the southwest, was swamped with almost as much. Between May 11 and July 13 Melita received more than 350 mm (almost 14 inches) of rain, compared to around 300 mm (almost 12 inches) at Starbuck. However, *FIW* records show the Starbuck area received in total 556 mm of rain, compared to 424 mm around Melita.

That's probably why average yields in the Starbuck area were a lot lower than around Melita. Wheat, canola and oats averaged 11, five and 25 bushels an acre in the R.M. of Macdonald, which takes in Starbuck. In the R.M. of Arthur, where Melita is located, the same crops yielded 25, 23 and 48 bushels — not great, but much higher.

Some exceptions: *Much of the province but there were some nice crops,*

"Generally speaking the western areas (of Manitoba) didn't receive as much rain as the Red River Valley and also the topography there is a little bit more friendly to heavier downpours," said Burnett. "That's what caused the yields to improve as you went west."

Worst year ever

Average yields in 2005 were all down except for oilseed sunflowers and corn, which was a virtual writeoff in 2004. Province-wide wheat, canola and flax yields were only seven per cent lower than the 10-year average at 34, 27 and 18 bushels an acre. But as is so often the case, averages are misleading, especially when 1.5 million acres was never seeded.

Average yields, acres Manitoba 2005, 2004

Crop	2005 b/a	2004b/a	% change	10 y ave	% change	000s acres '05	000s acres'04	% change
Red Spring wheat	34	46.4	-27	36.7	-7	1.897	2.077	-9
Argt canola	27	31.9	-15	29.2	-7	2.005	2.376	-16
Barley	44	68.7	-36	57.4	-23	0.5055	0.739	-32
Peas	22	46.9	-53	34.6	-36	0.0988	0.137	-28
Flax	18	18.3	-2	19.4	-7	0.284	0.278	-2
Corn	75	1.3	5867	93.3	-20	0.097	0.139	-50
Oats	48	97.4	-51	76.5	-37	0.441	0.555	-20
Soybeans	21	8.1 1	63	28.6	-27	0.0949	0.157	-40
Winter wheat	34	65.2	-48	49.6	-31	0.0857	0.334	-74
Navy beans	lbs/a 931	lbs/a 358	160	lbs/a 1514	-39	0.00717	0.0919	-22
Non-oil sunflower	lbs/a 1040	lbs/a 433	140	lbs/a 1450	-28	0.1079	0.117	-8
Oil sunflower	lbs/a 1532	499.8	207	lbs/a 1477	4	0.027	0.0241	-12

Source: Manitoba Agricultural Services Corporation

saw a second tough crop year in 2005, such as in the Northwest.

Andy Baker at Beausejour went from having his best wheat crop — 65 bushels an acre in 2004, to his worst — 15 bushels an acre in 2005.

"It was a heck of a year, I'll tell you," he said.

"We had such heavy rains so often water was running over (ditch) dikes and it would pile up in the low end of the section. That's a lot of rain to get at one time when that happens and we had that happen, I think in one place, six times."

Half of Baker's 4,000-acre farm didn't get seeded because it was too wet and he wishes he hadn't planted anything given the poor yields he received. Baker couldn't plant the canola, oats and soybeans he had planned on. He seeded canaryseed, but it too was a disaster.

In 2004 Baker's flax yielded 34 bushels an acre and he sold it for an average $15 a bushel. In 2005 his flax yield nine bushels an acre and the price in January was around $6. Baker said he was surprised his flax yielded as well as it did considering how often it was submerged.

Baker said his oil sunflowers, which might have yielded 900 pounds an acre — half a normal crop, did the best.

"If we'd had one less rain somewhere in the middle to give the crop a break we would've probably had a reasonable crop," Baker said. "Every five or six days we'd get some major downpour and soak everything."

It's still wet in the Beausejour area. Two wells on Baker's farm have been running over for more than a year — a sign the water table is high.

Northwest an exception

For the second consecutive year farmers in northwest Manitoba have enjoyed bumper crops, although an early frost reduced quality in 2004. Wheat and canola on Gust's farm near Bowsman, in the R.M. of Swan River, yielded 55 bushels an acre in 2005.

"I couldn't believe it," Gust said. "With wheat I've had those type of yields before, but canola never even close. The highest I've ever really grown before was about 40 (bushels an acre) on about 300 acres. Other than that it would just be small areas that would make 40."

Gust was not alone with his good fortune. Wheat, canola and oats in the R.M. of Swan River in 2005 averaged 57, 44 and 70 bushels an acre, respectively.

It was a similar story throughout the northwest. In the R.M. of Minitonas wheat, canola and oat yields averaged 53, 45 and 70 bushels an acre. In the R.M. of Shell River they averaged 61, 47 and 77 bushels.

Gust said the growing season began a bit wetter than he prefers, but in the end the weather must have been just about perfect to get the yields he did.

What a difference a year makes. In 2004 the average wheat yield in the R.M. of Lakeview was 61 bushels an acre — the highest in the province; in 2005 it was 45. The R.M. of Woodland averaged 42 bushels of canola acre in 2004 and only 12 in 2005. In the R.M. of Grey, oats averaged 121 bushels an acre in 2004 and just 31 in 2005.

On the whole 2005 was poor year for oats outside of the northwest averaging 48 bushels an acre compared to 97 in 2004 and the long-term average of 76.5.

Winter wheat took a similar hit, averaging just 34 bushels an acre — one-third the long-term average.

Peas averaged 22 bushels an acre compared to 47 bushels in 2004; the long-term average of 35.

"The bigger difference this year was that most of the standard (major) crops were impacted by the excess moisture and because there is more acres of those that's probably why we're into a record (payout) situation," Sulkers said. "It just affected more producers."