



COMMENTARY

“The Voice of Manitoba Farmers”

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Water Regs Should be Top-of-Mind

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Good water management is a top priority for farmers. Whether it's irrigation, drainage, providing water for livestock, or just the need for the right amount of rain at the right time, our success hinges on it.

Government can't manage the rain, but Manitoba's Department of Water Stewardship does have a major influence on how we use water on the farm. They're responsible for administering and enforcing The Water Rights Act, and that includes all use, diversion, and control of water in the province.

Delegates at Keystone Agricultural Producers' recent General Council meeting in Brandon learned more about the role of this department and water regulation and enforcement. It's fair to say that farmers have a lot of questions.

One of the most important things that farmers need to know is that they need a license from Water Stewardship for almost all water-related projects, and that the license has to be approved before any work is started. Whether or not you need a license for drain maintenance is up for interpretation. The rule of thumb is that an excavation of up to 12" of non-mineral topsoil is allowed, as long as there are no recognizable impacts on the landscape. In these cases, it's important to talk to the department to find out ahead of time that the drain maintenance being planned is allowable.

Water Stewardship is still a relatively new department in the province and has seen a lot of responsibilities and staff shifting in and out. This shuffle, combined with a staff shortage that is only now being addressed, meant that the timeline to actually receive a license has been too long. Right now, licenses are being approved in three to four months if all the information is provided with the application.

This is something that farmers have to keep in mind when planning their water projects. If we want to start a drainage project in the fall, we can't wait until September to request the license because it won't be ready in time.

One of the other challenges is that it's still difficult to get approvals for water storage. That's a serious problem for farmers who do want to manage this resource for on-farm use.

One of the most important things that delegates heard at the meeting is that Water Stewardship officers are instructed to take a co-operative approach to make sure that the rules and regulations are followed. This means that department staff should be working with farmers and landowners once a problem is identified to try to fix it, instead of just writing up a ticket. For our part, farmers need to be aware of the rules and plan ahead with their water projects so that we can use and protect this valuable resource.