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Aerial spraying a must for today's farmer

Posted Apr. 15, 2013 by Rebeca Kuropatwa in Features

Farmers who need more and more applications of herbicide and fungicide might want to put a local aerial applicator on speed dial

People used to think that hiring an airplane was the most expensive option, but that's no longer the case," says Brennan Jardine, a commercial aerial sprayer at Nipawin, Sask. "Farmers now know if they hire a ground rig or drive over it themselves it will cost as much or more than an airplane."

There are times when an airplane is the best option for spraying.

"Spray planes used to be thought of something to use just on a 911 basis. Like, in Saskatchewan, they'd bring in airplanes if there was a big bug infestation," Jardine says.

"Manitoba, for years now, has been using aircrafts on a regular basis, with potatoes and the need for fungicide, pre-Roundup and such. In the last few years, Saskatchewan has started catching on — catching up with Manitoba."

More and more often, Prairie farmers are hiring aerial applicators to spray fungicide.

Five reasons to use aerial applicators

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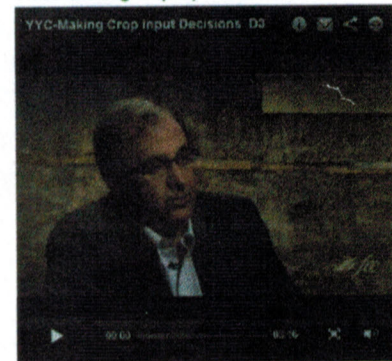
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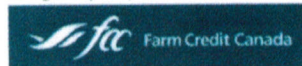
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According to Nasir Shaikh, provincial weed specialist at Manitoba Agriculture, Food, and Rural Initiatives' (MAFRI's) Crops Knowledge Centre, there are well established reasons to use aerial application for spraying.

1. It's fast. "It's a fast and very efficient method of pesticide application," says Shaikh. "One can cover a large area in a relatively short time.

"If a grower is falling behind with his spray schedule, this is a good option. As well, if an insect or disease problem is spreading very fast aerial application can be handy."

2. Less crop trampling. If an aerial applicator is applying your fungicide, you're making one less pass through your field. "Some studies show trampling losses can be anywhere from one to five per cent of the yield," Shaikh says. "This loss can be completely avoided."

Jardine also speaks to concerns around crop trampling. "Where tire tracks go, Roundup doesn't work, and you're also killing the crop. You end up with a contaminated, unclean field."

As well as trampling your crop, having more tires in your field can increase the chances of spreading diseases like clubroot.

3. It can get the job done. If the field is too wet to spray by ground, aerial application can still be a viable option.

"When there's a wet season, the last line of defence for your crops is the airplane," says Jardine. "Some farmers need spray, and the aircraft is the only way to do it in certain situations."

4. Environmental concerns. There are positive environmental aspects, Shaikh says. "From the environmental standpoint, there is less fuel used, less air pollution, and no soil compaction."

5. Economics. Jardine reminds farmers that, "For those with their own ground rig, there is still the cost of operating it. Airplanes simply make more economical sense, especially when taking into account trampling and other considerations."

However, aerial application isn't all upside. Shaikh points to the increased potential for spray drift and accidental injury to non-target crops. "This could lead to serious economic and legal litigations. As well, there can be potential health hazards if exposed to spray drifts."

Drift from a fungicide or an insecticide might not cause much damage to non-target crops, but herbicides may be a different story. "If there's a drift of a herbicide on a non-target crop, the damages can be substantial or even mean a complete loss of that crop," says Shaikh.

"Other factors that may limit the use of aerial spraying can be weather conditions being unfavourable, fixed obstacles in the fly zone, field size and shape and how far the loading deck is from the application area."

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The future of aerial application

Jardine sees a bright future for his business. "In this industry, I think there will be an increasing amount of bigger planes and fewer pilots, and, at the same time, there will be more demand for spraying."

Jardine recently returned from the Canadian Aerial Application Conference, and says, "Everything pointed to the fact that business is really booming. As well, they're saying we're going to need more food than ever to feed the world. So, we're going to need more micro-nutrients and products being applied regularly. So, the need for spray planes will be strong."

Jardine also knows that there are going to be times when his service is the only option. "It's not a matter of if, but of when you're going to need an airplane — and if you don't get one, you're going to lose your crop. What happens a lot in recent years is farmers can't get planes when there's an emergency wet season or something. Spray planes are their only hope." †

Rebeca Kuropatwa is a professional writer in Winnipeg, Man.

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