



With all the talk of drought in 2009 and concerns over feed shortages, it's no surprise the alarm bells are sounding once again. With dry conditions last year and plants already impacted by over-grazing, pastures are expected to grow at a less than normal rate through the spring, especially if moisture conditions remain low.

"We're much drier than this time last year," confirms Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development soil moisture specialist Ralph Wright. "Extremely low soil moisture, typically seen once in 12-to-25 years on average, is being recorded across large areas of Alberta. That extreme dry soil zone is four times larger than this time last year."

"Most of the province didn't get enough precipitation to recharge soil moisture reserves in the fall before the ground froze," says Wright. "Plenty of spring rain will be needed to replenish dry soils and avoid a repeat of last year when drought conditions across much of the province crippled pasture and hay production."

With Environment Canada predicting below-normal precipitation for much of Western Canada from March through May, concern is high over the availability of feed for livestock this spring. The message in the fall was to plan ahead, secure hay supplies and seek out alternatives where hay was not in adequate supply. The spring message -- more of the same.

Plan ahead. Don't put your horses out on a pasture that has not had a chance to grow sufficiently. Plants should be 6-8 inches in height before you start grazing and this may take a little longer this spring, some experts are saying as much as a month. Prolonged dry soil conditions mean that plants are stressed and can take twice as long as healthy plants to grow. If you normally put your horses out on pasture in mid-May, plan for mid-June to give your pasture the rest and rebuilding time it requires.

After estimating when your pasture will be ready for grazing, calculate how much hay you will need between now and then and check your stock. If you think you might be short, start looking for backup supplies. If spring rain means the pasture grows more quickly than expected and the horses are turned out earlier, you can always store the additional hay for next year. Properly stored hay will retain most of the nutrients it started with.

If hay is scarce in your area, look to alternatives. See our September eNews article "Feeding When Hay is in Short Supply".

For the latest report on drought conditions in the province visit the [Alberta Agriculture web site](#).