



# Central Alberta Co-op Ltd.

## Field Scouting – Boots on the Ground

I can remember in my younger days, going on a “Crop Tour” with some buddies and maybe some refreshments. The reasons for doing that may have been more for pleasure than to identify problems or inspect for pests but none the less it leads to the topic of field scouting and why it is necessary to maximize the crops potential.

Field scouting refers to the many times that a field is inspected and monitored to assess progress and identify issues. Today's farming businesses manage risk and generally large investments in growing crops and there is little margin for error between making or losing money growing a crop. Field scouting can be very proactive in identifying pests, stand establishment, timing and staging as well as overall crop condition and allows for the management of when and what to do next.

Field scouting can happen from the tractor cab, but Growers also have a multitude of experts to help them in their field scouting activities. From retail agronomists, private consultants, supplier reps, government specialists and others. There is no shortage of support. Each of these experts bring knowledge and expertise to the farm gate to help the grower navigate all the decisions that go into growing a crop. When used to their fullest, all of these supporting entities improve the on-farm ability to manage risk and improve the chances of success.

The specific activities of field scouting usually starts with a plan. This would include a current crop plan along with a previous crop history. Any other field history information can be helpful in assessing potential weed, insect and disease issues that may show up. A historical look at pesticide usage prepares the person scouting the field for any potential patterns or holes in the pest control program. As well the plan helps the scout to be timely in their activities. Information like seeding date and spraying dates help plan ideal timing to enter the field to inspect emergence and efficacy.

Once the plan is complete, the actual scouting begins. Early in the growing season, an assessment of early weed emergence, winter annual weed presence and trash conditions is important prior to seeding. This information helps the Grower plan his pre-seed burn off and trash management strategy.

During seeding, some random checks of seeding depth and seedbed conditions allow for fine tuning the drill to improve emergence and stand establishment. Once emergence has happened, some assessment of plant stand, and plant health can be collected to adjust for next year.

The next big sweep through all fields is a weed and insect inspection. Looking for insect damage especially in canola with flea beetles and cutworms alerts the Grower when a damage threshold may have been reached. Also, at this time numbers and species of weeds are being looked at to determine the right herbicide and the right timing of application.

Next comes the efficacy check of herbicide performance in the 2-3 weeks after application. If performance of the herbicide is less than expected, potential reasons and respray strategies can be discussed.

As crops near fungicide timing, scouting determines yield potential of the crop, diseases presence, weather and environmental risks all giving the Grower information to help make decisions.

As harvest looms, scouting looks at potential preharvest weed control timing, desiccation timing and ultimately harvest timing. Fall is also a good opportunity to assess stubble for final plant stand, disease prevalence, weeds present and overall conditions in the field.

Without scouting fields regularly and thoroughly, the Grower is somewhat blind to what maybe going on in the field. The old saying “you can't manage what you don't measure” applies to field scouting as much as any other activity on the farm.

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