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IRRIGATION: CROP INSURANCE FOR HAY FARMS?

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The warm summer months are here and if they resemble the past two summers, we can expect periods of dry spells and the attendant headaches for Québec livestock feed producers in 2019. Given the situation, could irrigation serve as the best insurance policy for farmers?

A lack of rain, besides its potential negative effects on crop quality, can generate serious financial burdens for livestock producers, as the scarcity of hay drives up prices. With regard to hay crops and pasture fields, La Financière Agricole du Québec recently reported a record number of insurance payouts, totalling nearly $60 million for the 2018 summer crop insurance program. Hay was the most severely impacted crop, accounting for 60% of the claims filed for all crop categories combined!

Irrigation—widely used for crops such as potato and strawberry—may provide a cost-effective solution for forage crops by compensating for the insufficient rainfall. Irrigation could serve as a sort of "crop insurance" for farmers by ensuring an abundant production of quality livestock feed.

Organic dairy and beef producers are especially concerned because they must graze their herds outdoors and generally have fewer options for feeding animals when hay is scarce.

Various irrigation systems are available on the market. Through its projects, IRDA has gained extensive experience in their operation, particularly as regards the commercial production of potatoes, strawberries, blueberries, and haskap berries.

The aim of IRDA's projects has been to develop decision-support tools for managing irrigation that make this practice more efficient and accessible.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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IRRIGATE, BUT AT WHAT COST?

Notwithstanding the above efforts, fodder crop irrigation is not necessarily a viable and cost-effective option for all. Expenditures on irrigation equipment may account for a considerable proportion of total production costs, especially in seasons where rainfall is inadequate. To bring expenses under control, a sensible alternative would be for farmers to join together in a cooperative arrangement in which they share agricultural equipment (CUMA: coopérative d'utilisation de matériel agricole).

As more and more farmers contemplate the feasibility of fodder crop irrigation, IRDA is searching for ways to make irrigation an economically viable long-term solution. Toward this goal, pilot tests are underway at a Saint-Jean-de-l'Île-d'Orléans dairy farm. The data collected will expand our knowledge on the water requirements for this type of production, as well as on the agronomic and economic impacts of irrigation. These trial studies will lay the foundation for the rational management of fodder crop irrigation and could yield benefits for farmers throughout Québec.

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