

## A CUT IN FARMERS' PAY

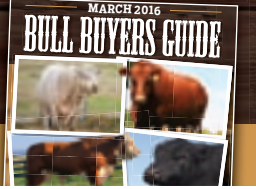
Incomes to drop three per cent » PG 3



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# Manitoba Co-OPERATOR

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## PMU sector to expand

Industry officials caution it is a small increase

BY RON FRIESEN

Co-operator contributor

An expected increase in contracted volumes of pregnant mare urine over the next two years is a small bit of good news for Manitoba's long-beleaguered PMU industry.

Pfizer Canada says it will increase the amount of PMU collected from ranches in Manitoba and Saskatchewan during 2016 and 2017.

Pfizer uses estrogen from PMU to manufacture Premarin used for hormone replacement therapy in post-menopausal women.

See **PMU** on page 6 »

## New flax variety sparks debate

It is not transgenic, but some fear glyphosate-resistant flax will produce a second Day of the Triffids



A new system could allow glyphosate-resistant flax to be developed by 'gene editing' as opposed to genetic modification, but how will customers react? PHOTO: CSP

BY SHANNON VANRAES

Co-operator staff

Some Manitoba flax growers are expressing concern after learning a glyphosate-resistant flax variety is only a few years away from being market ready.

Eric Fridfinnson of the Manitoba Flax Growers Association said the move towards herbicide-tolerant flax

began several years ago and stemmed from a desire to increase yields, which hover around 22 bushels per acre in Manitoba.

"We really feel that it would be a great benefit to flax to be able to use this technology," said Fridfinnson. "We see a number of areas where it would be useful for breeders to be able to move their program more quickly and raise the genetic potential of flax."

In the spring of 2010, the Flax Coun-

cil of Canada signed on with U.S. crop trait development firm Cibus to work on non-transgenic flax traits, providing significant funding for the company's work. The Manitoba Flax Growers Association also contributed to the project, providing approximately \$200,000 to the San Diego-based company over about four years.

But after Cibus failed to meet various

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Industry officials cautioned the announced increase in volume will probably not have a major impact on PMU production.

"From our perspective, it's not going to be anything of any significance," said Norm Luba, executive director of the North American Equine Ranching Information Council, a non-profit association in Louisville, Kentucky representing PMU ranchers.

**"It will be a small increase over the current amount that we contract."**

CHRISTINA ANTONIOU  
Pfizer Canada

Still, it is a welcome development for a once-booming industry reduced to a shadow of its former self by severe cut-backs over the last 15 years.

It is believed to be the first increase in contracted PMU volumes since Pfizer bought Wyeth Inc., the previous Premarin manufacturer, in 2009.

Pfizer would not reveal the amount of the increase, nor would it say how much PMU it currently contracts from its 19 operations.

"It will be a small increase over the current amount that we contract," was all Christina Antoniou, corporate affairs manager for Pfizer Canada in Montreal, would say in an email message to the *Manitoba Co-operator*. "We are currently in the process of contracting for 2016-17 and therefore cannot provide any further details."

But she indicated some previously mothballed PMU operations could reopen as a result.

"We can confirm that we are in discussions with ranchers who have existing facilities for this type of operation. Our rancher suppliers are, and will continue to be, those with outstanding credentials in horse management and welfare."

Antoniou indicated a recent improvement in Premarin sales is responsible for the increase.

"The amount of estrogen we require from our ranchers has always been driven by product demand."

At peak, Wyeth contracted with 450 PMU ranches in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and North Dakota. A plant in Brandon, established in 1966 and still in operation, processes PMU into Premarin.

Manitoba was the hub of PMU production during its heyday. In 2002, the industry contributed \$61 million to the province's economy through sales of PMU and live animals.

Menopausal hormone therapy (MHT) was widely prescribed during the 1990s to treat menopausal symptoms. But a research study by the Women's Health Initiative (WHI), begun in 1991 and published in 2002, suggested MHT increased the risk of heart attack, breast cancer, stroke and blood clots.

The results caused a sharp drop in MHT use and a decreased demand for Premarin as a result. PMU operations ceased completely in North Dakota and Alberta and were gradually reduced to a mere handful in Manitoba and Saskatchewan.

However, MHT slowly recovered after an expert panel reviewed the WHI study. It found the conclusions did not apply to most menopausal women starting MHT, a group the WHI did not study.

Today, according to the Hormone Health Network, scientific evidence suggests the benefits of MHT outweigh the risks in most cases.

"No one medicine is right for everyone," Antoniou said. "Ongoing analysis of the WHI (study) has helped confirm that the risk-benefit profile for hormone therapies varies among patients based on a number of factors, including patient age, time since onset of menopause and certain risk factors, and that hormone therapy remains an appropriate treatment option for many women."



PHOTO: ISTOCK

FLAX Continued from page 1

milestones, the council ended its arrangement with the company.

"A year and a half ago it was not meeting the goals or steps that were set," Fridfinnson said. "We felt we had to suspend the program, but it continued to work on it after that and we still have an agreement with it and have some ownership of the process."

According to the Cibus's website, glyphosate-resistant flax will be launched in the U.S. in 2019 and in Canada in 2020.

Don Rourke raised the issue during Manitoba Flax Growers' annual general meeting in Winnipeg earlier this month, which was held in conjunction with the annual Crop Connect conference.

"Personally, I don't want it," he said. "I don't think resistant flax is something we need."

Raising the spectre of CDC Triffid — a transgenic variety that saw Canadian flax shut out of the European market — the Minto-area producer said introducing a new modified crop could again risk Canada's access to overseas markets.

Fridfinnson was quick to point out that in the technical sense, he doesn't believe the process used by Cibus is considered a genetic modification.

"It is not a GMO technology, it's gene editing, it's mutagenesis," he said.

How the European Union defines the trait has yet to be ascertained.

"The European Union has not decided yet, whether or not it is going to consider this technology GMO or not, however, it is the direction the industry is going," said Rachel Evans, extension agronomist for the Flax Council of Canada. "In the traditional definition of a GMO you have a new trait going into a plant, what they are calling this technology is a 'rewriting,' and so it is highly technical in terms of the difference, but there is a difference."

Fridfinnson is optimistic that the public will understand the difference between the variety development techniques and accept herbicide-resistant flax.

"I hope that consumers will give it a fair hearing and look at the benefits that it could provide."

**BEWARE THE TRIFFIDS... they grow  
...know...walk...talk...stalk...and KILL!**



Triffid flax was unfortunately named after a genetically modified outer-space creature that strikes people blind with its stinger. FILE PHOTO

**"The European Union has not decided yet whether or not it is going to consider this technology GMO."**

RACHEL EVANS

Others were less confident. "We're splitting hairs," said Rourke. "It's still glyphosate resistant."

In the future, Fridfinnson said the hope is that Cibus's "Rapid Trait Development System" will allow for the development of other novel traits and new flax varieties. Glyphosate resistance was chosen as a starting point because the herbicide is well understood, widely available and inexpensive.

"In terms of glyphosate, you get 12 farmers in a room and you will get 12 different opinions," said Paul Dribnenki, a consultant who has worked with the flax council on yield improvement strategies.

"I think glyphosate was a reasonable choice... the good thing about glyphosate right now is that the cost of glyphosate is really pretty low per acre, so it is certainly cost effective."

But whatever happens in the future, Evans said that market access will be at the forefront of the decision-making process.

"I think I can probably speak for the flax council... to say that we are first and foremost interested in market acceptance, so we are continuing conversation with Cibus," she said. "No one wants a repeat."

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## ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING AND SPEAKER MARCH 5, 2016

HOLIDAY INN AIRPORT WEST  
2520 PORTAGE AVENUE, WINNIPEG, MB R3J 3T6

Join your fellow sheep producers to hear Dr. Reuben Neumeyer speaking on "Practical Sheep Matters from a Vet's perspective".

### Schedule of events:

9:30	Registration	
10:00 - 12:00	Dr. Neumeyer	Agenda and resolutions can be found at
12:00 - 1:00	Lunch	
1:00 - 3:30	Annual General Meeting	<a href="http://www.mbsheep.ca">www.mbsheep.ca</a>

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March 1, 2015 to: [mb@mbsheep.ca](mailto:mb@mbsheep.ca) or 204-421-9434

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