

Ag in the throne speech

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The Manitoba government is dipping into its rainy day fund for \$15 million additional money it expects to pay out under the Canadian Agricultural Income Support (CAIS) program this year.

Glenn Young, vice-president of Keystone Agricultural Producers, says that's an indication the province is anticipating some large payouts under CAIS for this crop year. An estimated 1.5 million acres of Manitoba farmland couldn't be seeded due to an unusually wet spring and crops in many areas of the province that did get seeded didn't fare well.

CAIS is cost-shared by the federal and provincial governments at a ratio of 60 per cent federal, 40 per cent provincial.

"I think it's a sign of the times," Young said in an interview last week. "I think an announcement like that in the Throne Speech would lead us to conclude that probably the province is over its original estimates for the cost of the program."

The Throne Speech also said the province is expecting to pay out \$300 million to farmers from crop insurance this year, far surpassing last year's record \$198 million.

Payments to producers under the excess moisture insurance will be more than double, rising to \$58 million from last year's \$25 million.

Young said farmers would

have liked to see more recognition of the unusual environmental challenges farmers faced this past production season in the Throne Speech. "I don't think that the government can forget that it's a serious problem and it might take more than CAIS to fix it," he said. "We were hoping that maybe there would be a little extra."

School tax rebate up

But he said it is encouraging that the province is continuing to work towards removing education taxes from farmland. The province introduced a 50 per cent reduction in taxes from farmland for 2005. That reduction will be increased to 60 per cent for the 2006 school year.

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The Throne Speech commits the province to a campaign called "Farm it in Manitoba, finish it in Manitoba," highlighting efforts to expand hog and beef processing in the province.

As well, it is launching a "Farm to Fork" food safety program under the supervision of the province's new chief veterinarian. "It will provide an added level of assurance to support the made-in-Manitoba brand. This year our government will also develop initiatives designed to expand organic farming in our province."

The Throne Speech says Manitoba will become the first province in Canada to develop a project that supports farms in carrying out a range of environmentally friendly farming practices and alternative land use services.

That announcement was welcomed by KAP vice president Ian Wishart, one of the authors of the Alternative Land Use Services Proposal (ALUS).

"ALUS will be a truly made-in-Manitoba opportunity for farmers, rural communities, and every Manitoban who appreciates cleaner water, healthy soils, and wildlife, and this pilot project will ensure that we get it right," says Wishart. "This announcement will help farmers find the best way forward to build their capacity for environmental stewardship."

The province is also establishing two new scholarships this year to further promote innovation in rural Manitoba: a Centennial Scholarship to the University of Manitoba's Faculty of Agriculture and Food Sciences; and a Rural Economic Development Scholarship at Brandon University.

In non-agriculture related initiatives, the Throne Speech committed the government to providing shorter waiting periods and "closer to home" health care services, assistance to homeowners for improving energy efficiency and relief from repeated spikes in heating costs.

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