

# Flax on the Farm

## Early Season Weed Control and Emergence Monitoring

### I. Early Season Weed Control with In-crop Herbicides

- Flax is a relatively poor competitor with weeds. Therefore, effective early season weed control is key to maximizing the yield of your crop. Weed control becomes even more critical if the flax crop has emergence at a less than optimal rate or if your pre or post-seed burn off for weed control was less successful than desired.
- Reduced moisture at seeding will have weed control implications.
  - Fewer weed seeds will be able to germinate, so the early season weed flush may be delayed or reduced.
  - Some pre-plant herbicides (Authority, Authority Charge and Fortress MicroActiv) require a rainfall after application for activation.
  - Drought conditions may delay the environmental breakdown of herbicides with residual effects.
- The efficacy of some herbicides is affected by low moisture due to weeds being stressed and therefore more tolerant to the chemical. The flax crop may also be damaged if certain herbicides are applied during drought conditions.
- Practice the four rights of weed management (right product, right stage, right conditions, right rate) to maximize the efficiency of weed control and to prevent the development of resistance.
- The use of pest control products that are not registered to flax or that are applied outside of the recommended pre-harvest interval can result in trade issues related to maximum residue limits (MRLs).
- Currently, only three different groups of herbicides (1, 4 and 6) are registered for in-crop use on flax and there is little overlap between the weeds controlled by each of these groups. This makes it challenging to use herbicide rotation for controlling the development of resistance. See Table 1 (next page) for a summary of the in-crop herbicides registered for use on flax.
- The latest stage at which any herbicide can be applied to flax is the early bud stage.
- Flax is very sensitive to many herbicides, so ensure that your sprayer is well rinsed before spraying flax.
- Monitor the environmental conditions at the time of application to minimize crop injury. Flax is sensitive to some of the registered Group 4 and 6 herbicides, especially under warm and humid conditions.
- There are several factors that may reduce in-crop herbicide efficacy:
  - Rainfall shortly after application can reduce the activity of some herbicides.
  - Water quality can reduce the efficacy of some herbicides (e.g. glyphosate, MCPA, Clethodim)
  - Extreme environmental conditions (moisture, temperature) and poor fertility can negatively impact the effectiveness of herbicides.
- If tank mixing, follow label instructions for the order in which different chemicals are added, as mixing in the wrong order may result in crop injury or reduced weed control.
- Provincial crop protection guides, product labels and manufacturers are important sources of information for herbicide-related information.

**Table 1. Currently registered in-crop herbicides for flax**

Herbicide	Crop stage	Group	Weeds Controlled (most common and those with confirmed herbicide resistance)																							
			barnyard grass	buckwheat, wild	chickweed	cleavers	cow cockle	dandelion	foxtail, green	foxtail, yellow	hemp-nettle	kochia	lamb's quarters	mustard, ball	mustard, wild	oat, wild	Persian darnel	pigweed, redroot	shepherd's purse	smartweed, annual	sow-thistle, annual	stinkweed	thistle, Canada	thistle, Russian	volunteer canola	volunteer cereals
Bentazon	> 5 cm (2")	6			✓	✓											S	✓	✓		✓	✓	S**	✓		
Bromoxynil	5-10 cm (2-4")	6	✓			✓**					✓	✓		✓**			✓**	✓		✓**		✓	✓	✓**		
Bromoxynil + MCPA (amine, ester or K salt)	5 cm (2") to early bud stage*	4,6	✓			✓**	✓**			S	✓	✓	✓**	✓**			✓**	SS	✓**	✓**	SS	✓	✓**	✓**		
Bromoxynil/MCPA ester	5 cm (2") to early bud stage*	4,6	✓			✓					✓	✓	✓	✓			P	✓	✓		✓	TG	✓	✓		
Clethodim	all	1	✓					✓							✓	✓									✓	
Clethodim + Bromoxynil/MCPA ester**	5 cm (2") to early bud stage*	1,4,6	✓	✓		✓		✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	P	✓	✓		✓	TG	✓	✓	✓	
Clethodim + MCPA ester	5 cm (2") to pre-bud stage*	1,4	✓				✓**	✓		S	✓	✓	✓**	✓**	✓	✓	✓**	SS	✓**	✓**	SS	✓	✓**		✓	
Clethodim + Lontrel	5-10 cm (2-4")	1,4	✓	✓				✓							✓	✓									✓	
Clopyralid	5-10 cm (2-4")	4	✓																							
Clopyralid + MCPA (amine or ester)	5-10 cm (2-4")	4	✓				✓**			S	✓	✓	✓**	✓**			✓**	SS	✓**	✓**	SS	✓	✓**			
Clopyralid + Poast Ultra	5-10 cm (2-4")	1,4	✓	✓				✓							✓	✓									✓	
Clopyralid + Post Ultra + MCPA (amine or ester)	5-10 cm (2-4")	1,4	✓	✓			✓**	✓		S	✓	✓	✓**	✓**	✓	✓	✓**	SS	✓**	✓**	SS	✓	✓**		✓	
Clopyralid + Select	5-10 cm (2-4")	1,4	✓	✓				✓							✓	✓									✓	
Clopyralid + Select + MCPA (amine or ester)	5-10 cm (2-4")	1,4	✓	✓			✓**	✓		S	✓	✓	✓**	✓**	✓	✓	✓**	SS	✓**	✓**	SS	✓	✓**		✓	
Curtail M	5-15 cm (2-6")	4	✓					SR							✓	✓	✓	SS	✓	✓	SS	✓			✓	
Curtail M + Poast Ultra	5-15 cm (2-6")	1,4	✓	✓				SR	✓				SS	✓	✓	✓	✓	SS	✓	✓	SS	✓			✓	
Curtail M + Select/Centurian	5-15 cm (2-6")	1,4	✓	✓				SR	✓				SS	✓	✓	✓	✓	SS	✓	✓	SS	✓			✓	
Equinox EC	emerg to 35 cm (14")	1						✓							✓											✓
Equinox EC + Buctril M	5 cm (2") to 35 cm (14")	1,4,6	✓			✓		✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		P	✓	✓		✓	TG	✓	✓	✓	
Equinox EC + FLAXMAX DLX	5-10 cm (2-4")	1,4	✓					SR	✓	✓	S	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	SR	✓	✓	SR	✓			✓	
MCPA	5 cm (2") to pre-bud stage*	4					✓**			S	✓	✓	✓**	✓**			✓**	SS	✓**	✓**	SS	✓	✓**			
Poast Ultra	all	1	✓					✓							✓	✓										✓
Poast Ultra + Bromoxynil/MCPA ester	5 cm (2") to early bud stage*	1,4,6	✓	✓		✓		✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	P	✓	✓		✓	TG	✓	✓	✓	
Poast Ultra + MCPA ester	5 cm (2") to pre-bud stage*	1,4	✓				✓**	✓		S	✓	✓	✓**	✓**	✓	✓	✓**	SS	✓**	✓**	SS	✓	✓**		✓	
Quizalofop	all	1	✓					✓							BT											BT
Quizalofop + Lontrel	5-10 cm (2-4")	1,4	✓	✓				✓							BT							✓				BT

Adapted from the 2018 SK and MB crop protection guides. Check product labels for application rates, complete list of weeds controlled, and restrictions (environmental conditions, soil characteristics, adjuvant and surfactant requirements, water volume, number of applications, buffer zones, weed stages, re-cropping, re-entry periods and pre-harvest intervals).

\*crop most tolerant at 5-10 cm (2-4")

\*\*only certain products/formulations depending on the province

Type of control: BT=before tillering, P=possibly poorly controlled, S=suppression only, SR=spring rosettes only, SS= spring or small seedlings only, TG=top growth only

## II. Emergence Monitoring

### Germination vs. Emergence

Germination refers to the process of the emergence of the seedling from the seed coat. Emergence is the appearance of the recently germinated seedling above the soil.

If moisture was sufficient at seeding, flax seedlings should begin to emerge from the soil anywhere between 5 to 10 days after seeding, depending on seeding depth and soil temperature.

One way to work towards optimizing flax performance on your farm is to determine the plant population and then calculate emergence rate. Relating these numbers back to the seeding rate used, the environmental conditions and other factors at seeding can help identify management practices for the growing season and improvements that can be made next year.

Steps to determine plant population and emergence rate:

1. At 1.5 to 2 weeks after seeding, count the number of plants per square metre or foot in a few representative locations in the field and calculate the average. This number is the plant population. The minimum desired population for flax is 300 plants/m<sup>2</sup> (28 plants/ft<sup>2</sup>).
2. Plant population divided by the target plant population that was used to determine seeding rate multiplied by 100 will give the percent emergence. A typical emergence rate for flax is 50 to 60%.

The implications of reduced crop emergence/establishment are delayed maturity, increased weed competition and reduced yield.

A. If the emergence rate and/or the plant population is lower than what you were expecting, here are some possible explanations:

1. Seeding rate too low

- The recommended seeding population for flax is between 600 and 1200 seeds/m<sup>2</sup> (56 to 112 seeds/ft<sup>2</sup>). This accounts for a typical emergence rate for flax of 50 to 60% and should produce a plant population of 300 to 720 plants/m<sup>2</sup> (28 to 67 plants/ft<sup>2</sup>).
- Seeding rates should be adjusted for both germination rate and seed size because these will directly impact the resulting plant population.
  - For example, at a seeding rate of 56 kg/ha (50 lb/ac), you would need to plant 62 kg/ha (55 lb/ac) for a seed lot with a germination of 90% or 70 kg/ha (62 lb/ac) to compensate for a germination rate of 80%.
  - Similarly, a seed size difference of 0.5 g at a 90% germination rate can mean the difference of seeding at 49 kg/ha (44 lb/ac) versus 53 kg/ha (47 lb/ac).
- Yellow-seeded varieties should typically be seeded at a 10 to 15% higher rate than brown-seeded varieties due to the thinness of their seed coats, which are more susceptible to damage.
- A sample of a seed lot can be sent to a licensed seed testing facility to determine the seed size/thousand seed weight and percent germination. You can calculate seed size by taking a representative sample of the lot, counting out 3 sets of 100 seeds, weighing each set of 100 seeds, averaging the 3 weights together and then multiplying that by 10. The resulting number is the weight per thousand seeds.
- Thousand seed weight and germination details can typically be obtained from the seed grower or retailer from which you purchased Certified seed.

## 2. Seeded too deep

- To determine if seeding depth is the reason for poor emergence, gently dig down into the seed row to locate seeds and measure that depth. Also take note of the condition of the seeds that you locate.
- The recommended seeding depth for flax is 0.75 to 1.5” (2 to 3.8 cm), depending on the moisture conditions at seeding.
- Flax is a smaller seeded crop, so the amount of food reserves in the seed available for the developing seedling are limited. If seeded deeper than 1.5” (3.8 cm), it is very likely that the seedling will deplete the seed reserves before emerging from the soil and will die.
- If the seeds you located are at a soil depth that falls within the recommended seeding depth range for flax, then poor emergence is due to another factor, so keep reading.

## 3. Poor quality seed planted

- Indicators that less-than-optimal quality seed was planted are: a lower-than-expected emergence rate; seed that didn't germinate even when seeded into adequate moisture; and abnormal seedlings (e.g. dead root or leaf tissue, curled roots or stems, missing roots or stems) that never reached the soil surface.
- Flax seed that is damaged may not germinate properly due to damage to the embryo, water not entering the seed properly during the very early stages of germination or the entry of pathogens into the seed.
- Damaged seed can be: cracked, split, shrivelled, weathered, frozen or diseased. The use of a seed treatment can prevent undesirable microorganisms from entering damaged seeds and infecting the embryo or the emerging seedling.
- Flax seed coats are relatively thin, especially those of yellow-seeded varieties, and therefore can be susceptible to damage during harvest and seeding.
- Seed lots are commonly tested for germination but can also be assessed for vigour. The vigour score gives an indication of how quickly and uniformly the seed will germinate and emerge from the soil under less-than-ideal conditions.

## 4. Lack of moisture

- Soil-to-seed contact is very important for flax, especially under dry conditions.
- Lack of moisture at seeding will result in reduced and/or variable crop emergence. Often, some of the seeds will germinate and emerge with the limited moisture available at seeding, while the remainder will stay dormant until more moisture is received. This produces a crop with two different stages of development which can lead to weed control and harvest challenges.
- Reduced moisture at seeding will also have weed control implications (see Section I).

## 5. Seed rot/seedling blight

- Seedlings affected by these pathogens at very early stages may not fully germinate or may be weak or abnormal. Look for wilted seedlings with a narrow band of shrivelled stem or shrivelled and/or brown roots. Dead plants may also be present.
- In flax, these diseases are caused by a variety of species of soil-borne fungi (*Alternaria*, *Colletotrichum*, *Fusarium*, *Pythium*, *Rhizoctonia*) and infection by these pathogens may occur at any growth stage.
- Seed treatments are specifically designed to combat these types of pathogens and there are three currently registered for use on flax (Insure Pulse, INTEGO Solo and Vitaflo).
- Other ways to avoid these pathogens are to plant high-quality seed and to follow a one-in-four-year rotation for flax to limit the build up of disease in the soil. To specifically control *Rhizoctonia*, do not seed flax into summer fallow, avoid legumes and sugar beets in the rotation, ensure a firm seed bed and seed early.

#### 6. Soil crusting

- A heavy rainfall after seeding can cause the soil to crust. The force of large droplets combined with a high rate of rainfall can disintegrate soil aggregates and cause small particles to block surface pores. When the modified soil structure dries, it forms a cement-like layer on the soil surface which prevents seedlings from emerging, water from penetrating and gases from exchanging.
- Soils low in organic matter, having limited crop residue on the surface, or that are heavily cultivated are the most prone to crusting.
- If your soil is at risk of crusting, increase your seeding rate and do not seed deep to give the crop a greater chance of emerging.

#### 7. Herbicide residue or drift

- Early indications of herbicide damage are dead or damaged seedlings (e.g. dead tissue on leaves, chlorotic leaves and growing points, red/purple pigmentation of stems and leaves, bent stems, cupped leaves, twisted stems). Susceptible broadleaf weed seedlings will show similar symptoms.
- Crop rotation is an important consideration as some herbicides applied to the preceding crop may negatively impact the flax crop up to 3 years later. Low moisture conditions delay the breakdown of residual herbicides and can amplify injury effects to sensitive crops registered to be planted the following season. Refer to the provincial crop protection guides, product labels and/or manufacturers for more detailed information.
- Flax is highly sensitive to broadleaf herbicides, glyphosate and glufosinate such that it is often damaged by herbicide drift from nearby crops. It is critical to adhere to the minimum buffer zones listed for herbicides when spraying nearby crops and to increase these if spraying under less than ideal conditions.
- Consider using a drift control agent when spraying nearby crops.

#### 8. Frost damage

- Frost damage to flax is not very common, as the crop is quite frost tolerant. Newly emerged seedlings are tolerant to -3.9°C (25°F) and those at the 2-leaf stage are tolerant to -8°C (18°F), if they are hardened off by cool days prior to the frost.
- Symptoms of frost damage are wilted plants, dead or dying leaf tissue (dark green, brown or black), tissue that appears water-filled or spongy, or dead plants. Frost canker is a condition where the main stem is girdled at or near the ground causing the plant to either fall over and die or send out several tillers.
- Excessive residue on the soil at seeding will delay soil warming and can make seedlings more susceptible to frost damage (see point 9 below).

#### 9. Fertilizer damage

- Flax is highly sensitive to seed-placed fertilizer, so mid-row or side banding are recommended.
- The primary symptom of fertilizer injury is reduced crop establishment from decreased germination and seedling damage. Fertilizer damage is directly caused by the components of the product; salt inhibits the seed from absorbing water, and certain elements damage developing seedlings due to their toxicity. The resulting stressed embryos and seedlings are more susceptible to deleterious soil microbes.
- Dry conditions tend to intensify fertilizer injury, especially if ammonia-containing fertilizers are used.

#### 10. Too much straw/residue

- Large amounts of residue from the previous crop on the soil surface can physically impede the emergence of the flax crop, especially if it was planted deeply. Uneven residue distribution will lead to gaps and patchy emergence.
- Residue on the soil surface delays the warming of the soil and can slow germination, reduce seedling growth and produce spindly seedlings.
- Large amounts of residue can also make newly emerged seedlings more susceptible to frost damage by diminishing the insulating properties of the soil.

#### 11. Cutworms

- Cutworms are the larvae of a family of moths called noctuids.
- Indications of cutworm damage are patchy emergence in the drier areas of the field, plants that have stems cut off at the soil surface, and wilted and/or yellowing plants. Similar damage can be caused by wireworms but these insects seldom damage flax.
- You can confirm the presence of cutworms by digging down 1 to 2" (2.5 to 5 cm) in the soil and looking for larvae. The main identifiers of these larvae are that they are hairless (smooth-skinned) and curl up when disturbed. The threshold for flax is 4 to 5 larvae/m<sup>2</sup>. Several insecticides are registered for control of cutworms in flax.
- A new cutworm identification and management field guide for the Prairies is available from Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (<http://prairiepestmonitoring.blogspot.ca/p/cutworm-corner.html>).

B. If your flax crop emerged well but the plants are not healthy here are some possible explanations:

##### 1. Pale green or yellow leaves

- Micronutrient deficiency
  - Flax is sensitive to deficiencies in iron (Fe), manganese (Mn) and zinc (Zn), especially under wet conditions in calcareous soils. Plants suffering from this condition have pale green or yellow leaves (chlorosis) with distinct green veins. Flax plants typically grow out of the condition when the soil dries out but maturity is usually delayed. If conditions persist, terminal buds may die and plants may begin tillering. Research has shown that often no benefit is gained from applying the deficient micronutrient, so the simplest solution is to peruse a provincial seed guide and plant a variety that is more resistant.
- Macronutrient deficiency
  - Symptoms of macronutrient deficiencies can be difficult to diagnose visually since many are similar to those caused by other issues such as herbicide injury. Therefore, soil and tissue tests are typically required for confirmation of which nutrient is lacking.
  - Nitrogen is a major component of protein, DNA and chlorophyll. If lacking, the chlorophyll content of the leaves is reduced resulting in yellowing or paling of the oldest leaves. Plant growth and tillering will also be reduced if nitrogen levels are insufficient.
  - Phosphorous is important for root and shoot growth, stem strength, flower and seed production and is essential for many cellular processes within plants. Deficiency symptoms include stunted growth and purpling or browning of plant tissue (older tissues first).
  - Potassium is a key nutrient for many cellular processes in plants and contributes to the ability of plants to tolerate environmental stresses and to fight off insects and disease. If lacking, plants are stunted and the lower leaves will have burnt (yellow to brown) tips or edges.
  - Sulphur plays an important role in protein and chlorophyll formation and is involved in seed production. New growth will be yellow or pale green in colour if sulphur is limiting.

- To prevent macronutrient deficiencies, a soil test before seeding is recommended to determine the reserve levels of macronutrients in the soil and how much fertilizer to apply.
- Wet soil
  - Flax has a relatively shallow root system, so can be overwhelmed with standing water. Under these conditions, roots are deprived of oxygen and their function is impaired. Water and nutrient uptake is soon reduced causing the plants to slow their metabolism and begin recycling nutrients. Early signs of too much water are wilted plants and pale green or yellow older leaves.
- Herbicide damage
  - One of the first symptoms of herbicide damage is chlorosis, or a yellowing or paling of the leaves and/or growing points. More advanced symptoms include: dead tissue on leaves, red/purple pigmentation of stems and leaves, bent stems, cupped leaves and twisted stems.
  - Flax may also become chlorotic (also called flash) or wilted after the application of some of the registered Group 4 and 6 herbicides, but will recover after a few days.

## 2. Dead plants or plants shaped like a shepherd's crook

- The classic symptom of Fusarium wilt is a plant that is bent like a shepherd's crook. Plants infected by this pathogen may also be wilted or dead. If wilted, typically only the leaves on one side of the plant will be affected, unlike the entire plant as is the case with seedling blight.
- If you suspect that Fusarium is the culprit, soil and plant samples can be tested for the presence of the fungus.
- Fusarium is a soil-borne fungus that attacks roots. Quantities of the fungus rapidly build up in the soil if susceptible crops are seeded one after another. Spores can survive in the soil up to 10 years.
- The pathogen that causes Fusarium wilt prefers warm soils, so seeding early means that the plants are at a later developmental stage when infection typically occurs, making them more inherently resistant.
- This disease is the reason that flax grew so well on freshly broken land when pioneers settled the west and then yielded so poorly when grown the year after on the same soil.
- All currently registered flax varieties are at least moderately resistant (MR) to the pathogen meaning that some infection will still occur at a relatively low level as long as rotation recommendations are followed.
- Growing Certified seed will ensure the maximum tolerance to the disease, and a minimum rotation of 3 years between flax crops will reduce the spore load in the soil to an acceptable level.

**Flax is a very resilient crop, so despite having early challenges it will, except in the most extreme cases, compensate for seedling damage, low emergence rates and herbicide injury by branching out and taking longer to mature.**

**For more information about emergence monitoring and early season weed control in flax contact the following:**

Michelle Beath  
Agronomist  
Saskatchewan Flax Development Commission  
(306) 664-1901  
[michelle@saskflax.com](mailto:michelle@saskflax.com)

Dane Froese  
Industry Development Specialist – Oilseeds  
Manitoba Agriculture  
(204) 750-2840  
[dane.froese@gov.mb.ca](mailto:dane.froese@gov.mb.ca)

Matthew Bernard  
Provincial Specialist, Oilseed Crops  
Saskatchewan Ministry of Agriculture  
(306) 787-4668  
[matthew.bernard@gov.sk.ca](mailto:matthew.bernard@gov.sk.ca)

Murray Hartman  
Oilseed Specialist  
Alberta Agriculture and Forestry  
(403) 782-8024  
[murray.hartman@gov.ab.ca](mailto:murray.hartman@gov.ab.ca)

**Other useful links:**

Provincial Crop Protection Guides:

- Alberta: [https://www1.agric.gov.ab.ca/\\$department/deptdocs.nsf/all/agdex32](https://www1.agric.gov.ab.ca/$department/deptdocs.nsf/all/agdex32)
- Saskatchewan: <http://www.publications.gov.sk.ca/details.cfm?p=77706>
- Manitoba: <https://www.gov.mb.ca/agriculture/crops/guides-and-publications/#gfcg>

Herbicide carryover risk maps:

- Saskatchewan: [http://publications.gov.sk.ca/documents/20/104147-Herbicide\\_Carryover\\_2017\\_0613\\_0918.pdf](http://publications.gov.sk.ca/documents/20/104147-Herbicide_Carryover_2017_0613_0918.pdf)
- Manitoba: <https://www.gov.mb.ca/agriculture/crops/seasonal-reports/print,current-crop-topics.html>

Prairie Pest Monitoring Network blog: <http://prairiepestmonitoring.blogspot.ca/>

Sprayer tank cleanout tips: <https://sprayers101.com/sprayer-tank-cleanout/>

