

Preparing for Climate Change in the 21st Century: A Study of Agricultural Producers in
the Southern Prairies

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Most of our climate change models predict that regions such as the Canadian Prairies are likely to become dryer in the future and will be characterized by an increased risk of drought. Consequently, the droughts of 2001, 2002 and, in some places, 2003 offer a window on the future and an unparalleled opportunity to assess drought preparedness.

This research, which is based on farm-level information collected via a questionnaire survey and a series of case study interviews, sets out document the extent to which recent droughts caused producers to adopt a range of measures called drought-proofing strategies. Drought-proofing strategies are measures which have been developed and promoted by various agencies and organization as means of reducing a production unit's degree of exposure to drought and hence reduce the various risks associated with drought. The research will also attempt to explain, in a theoretically-informed way, the pattern of adoption of drought-proofing measures.

Data collection is still underway, but preliminary assessment of the information gathered so far suggests that the adoption of drought-proofing measures is seen by relatively few producers as an important priority. This preliminary finding is consistent with the literature on natural hazards which tells us that an individual's perception of the risk associated with natural hazards declines with time. Consequently, the more time that elapses since the last drought, the less likely it is that producers will adopt measures to reduce exposure to the negative consequences of drought.

Recognizing that these observations are extremely preliminary and based on a small but growing number of responses, it does seem reasonable to suggest that government agencies, researchers and producer organizations all have roles to play now vis-à-vis enhancing drought preparedness. Rather than waiting for the next drought – and it will come, it is just a question of when – and then responding with ad-hoc programs such as compensation packages, resources should be allocated now to enhance drought preparedness at the production-unit level by helping producers to better understand the nature and risk of drought and to facilitate the adoption of various drought-proofing measures.