



## GRAIN QUALITY FROM A BUYERS PERSPECTIVE

*By Ryan Barkwell, Summer Student and Debbie Miller, Organic Alberta*

Producers need to know what qualities a grain buyer looks for in a product. In a recent teleconference hosted by the Prairie Organic Grain Initiative, Bruce Roskens from Grain Millers, Alex Galarneau, Owner of PHS Organics, Jason Freeman from Farmer Direct Co-op and Mark Gimby from Growers International discussed issues they see in the industry today and provided tips to help alleviate those issues.

Proper management is required throughout the growing season. Most farmers are concerned with test weight, moisture, contamination and seed quality. Contamination is a special concern for buyers who are interested in purchasing food grade oats. Regulations have become more stringent in the last 10 years, and with the market trend for gluten free organic products, understanding best management practices is essential.

For oats, it is important to seed as early as possible in order to establish a strong root stem and good ground cover for weed control. It is also recommended to clean oats, as buyers only accept 2% wild oats. However, one must be careful to not de-hull the oats when cleaning them. This hastens grain degradation, and makes the product less attractive to buyers. The panel also encouraged the scalping of crops (a quick cleaning that removes larger debris). This practice can decrease dockage by nearly 30%. Finally, it is important for a farmer to understand proper crop rotation for their farms in order to find the balance between agronomic viability and market preferences.

Proper storage is a critical issue. Roskens noted that more grain is ruined in harvesting and storage than in improper field management. Aflatoxins, other mycotoxins, mold and pest infestation can occur in grain bins. Moldy grain is often a result of moisture that comes from wet falls, harvesting grain before it is dry, harvesting grain with immature weeds, or condensation that results from changing temperatures. Both Roskens and Galarneau stressed that they are buying a food ingredient, not a commodity. For this reason, the quality of the grain is of the utmost importance.

Bin maintenance is a must to reduce storage problems! Bins should be cleaned before new product is stored to prevent any carryover of contaminants. Prevention is 90% of the solution. If the crop is not sufficiently dry, aeration can reduce moisture and minimize conditions for mold. Bins should be mouse, insect and water tight. Buyers also recommend farmers rotate grain during winter months to prevent and remove moisture pockets that may form.

Farmers must take steps to prevent and eliminate mold. If moldy grain is noticed during loading or grain handling, it should be removed. Gone are the days when simply diluting moldy grain with healthy grain goes unnoticed. Moldy grain is a food safety hazard. Buyers will discount yields that contain moldy grain as regulations become ever more stringent.

In summary, organic grain producers should be concerned with proper management practices and maintaining sustainable storage facilities in order to produce high quality products and increase their own profitability. For more information, check out the fact sheets at [www.pivotandgrow.com](http://www.pivotandgrow.com).