

Fraser Valley's farming fields turn to swamp

by JILL St. LOUIS
VANCOUVER (CP) — Water has become the enemy of the Fraser Valley farmer this spring as nearly twice the average rainfall has turned low-lying fields to swamps.

District Agriculture Ministry officials say vegetable crops are up to one month behind normal years. Berry crops are also late in the verdant valley that runs east of Vancouver for about 160 kilometres.

Jack Brown farms 160 hectares in the lowlands of Surrey, a farming and bedroom community south-east of Vancouver.

Brown grows potatoes, grain and corn for cattle.

"The whole valley is suffering," said Brown, surveying his soggy fields. He was eager to return to work to take advantage of a temporary clearing in the weather that would allow him to do some planting.

"We'll get a crop in, but it still depends on what mother nature does to us after we plant it. We won't catch up 100 per cent."

"About half the acreage is in and that's what we'll be stuck with," Brown said.

"We're running two to three weeks late and everyone else is too."

Brown, who started farming in 1958, says the poor spring weather will have an effect through the system.

"All of the grower-owned co-operatives that grade, wash, sell and package the products, they're all going to be affected, because volume is a very important function of their operating cost. If they're going to be working on a 75-per-cent volume, it's very, very difficult for those various co-operatives to come anywhere close to breaking even."

Ralph Towsley of the B.C. Vegetable Marketing Board said the early potato crop is particularly

hard hit by the wet weather. They are the tiny, tender potatoes traditionally boiled and seasoned with butter and a sprinkling of parsley.

These potatoes, usually ready in early June, will be at least three weeks late, says Towsley, and this could mean as much as \$1 million in lost income to producers.

The leaf lettuce crop also is about two weeks late, Towsley said.

Producers, not consumers, will feel the impact hardest.

"To a limited extent consumers will pay more," he said. "In B.C. we tend to temper the price of imports. If we're later (in producing crops), import prices will remain higher."

Towsley said it is possible for growers to make up about two weeks of growing time, "but we need the good weather." He said it is too early to put a dollar value on how much producers might lose due to the weather.

Marnie James of the Ministry of Agriculture's Cloverdale office, in the heart of Surrey's farming belt, says only about half the 400 hectares of early potatoes have been planted.

In April, 105.8 millimetres rain fell in Richmond, a municipality adjacent to Vancouver. The average rainfall is 59.6 millimetres.

For the first 25 days of May, 99.2 millimetres of rain had fallen, compared with an average of 41.6 millimetres.

The low-lying delta land along the Fraser running east of Vancouver is part of the only two to three cent of British Columbia considered good farmland. The province is about 55 per cent self-sufficient in agriculture.

"The rain over the weekend could delay planting another week," said James.

"It wouldn't be unprecedented to be planting in June, but it's certainly not ideal."

Helmuth Sawatzky, who grows raspberries on 12 hectares in Clearbrook, about 75 kilometres east of Vancouver, says his crop is about two weeks behind.

"The big question mark is the weather," he said. "There has been some fairly significant winter damage. With the wetness, the blossoms aren't opening. We're getting root rot. The lush foliage is susceptible to bacterial viruses."

Sawatzky is in the hub of Canada's raspberry district where about 95 per cent of the country's raspberry output is produced in a 50-kilometre radius.

"The weather is on everyone," Sawatzky said, adding that in 15 years of growing raspberries he can't remember a worse year than this.

He expects consumers will feel the impact as well as crop yields are well below average.

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The application will be heard in mid-June.



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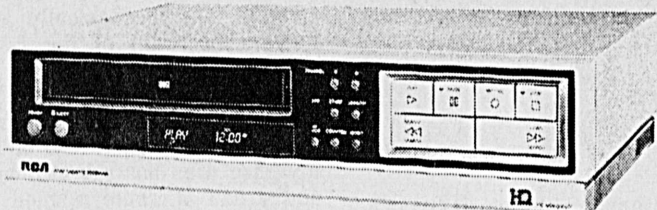
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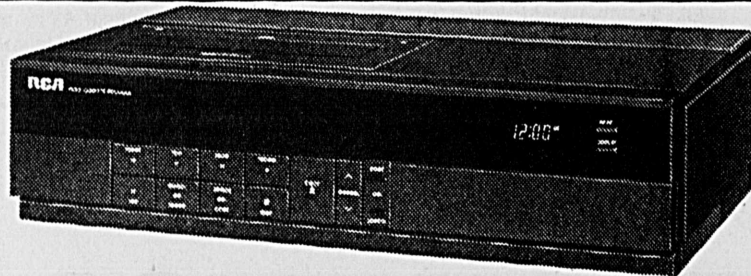


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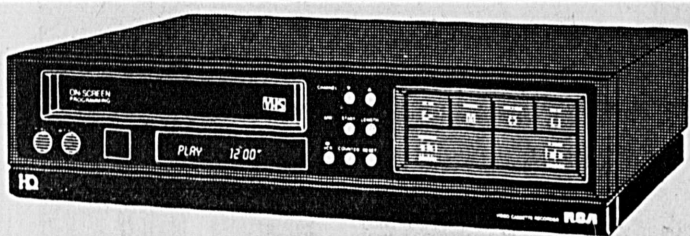


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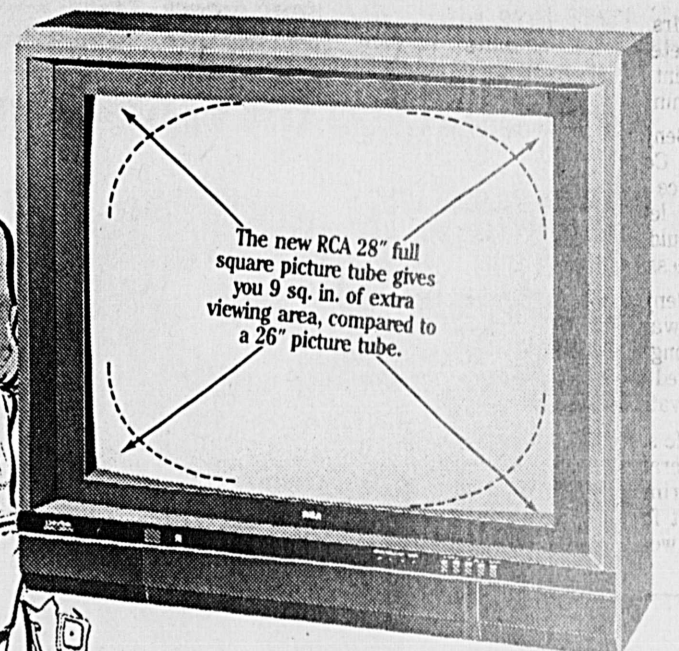
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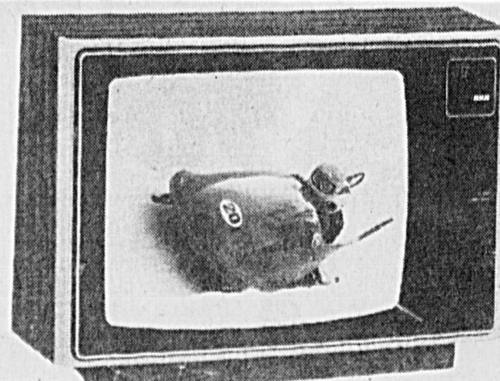
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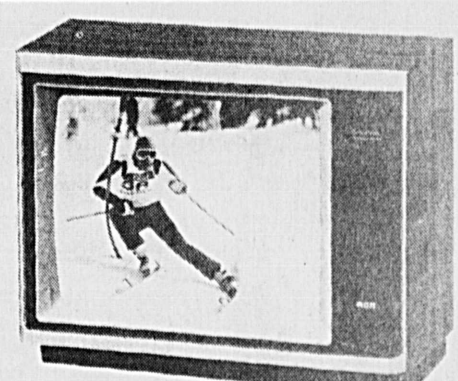


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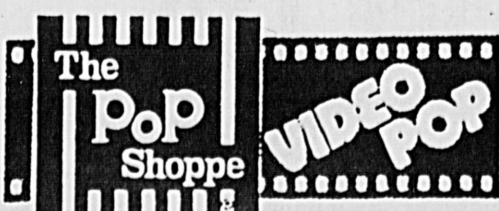


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