N.D. lentil acres grow

Ray, N.D., company chooses alternative crops

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RAY, N.D. — Business has been booming since the Continental Grain Co. stopped handling small grains two years ago to focus on lentils and other alternative crops.

Manager Joe Bloms says more North Dakota farmers are turning to lentils because the financial returns are so good.

Lentils fetch about 14 cents a pound. An average yield of 1,250 pounds per acre means a return of $188 a per acre for the producer.

"With spring wheat, you would need to average 35 bushels an acre at $5 a bushel to get that kind of return," Bloms says. "We rarely see 30-bushel-per-acre wheat around here."

Benefits of lentils

Lentils are also good for the soil, says Bloms, Continental's manager since 1979.

"They put nitrogen back into the soil; they don't require a lot of moisture and there are good returns for yields. There is less of a problem with wheat — with disease and pests — and the prices are pretty unstable."

Lentil seeds are among the most nutritious of the legume, or pea, family. They are rich in protein and carbohydrates.

Lentil acreage in North Dakota has grown from 1,000 in 1990, to more than 11,000 acres.

Most of the lentils in North Dakota are grown in the western part of the state. Mountrail County has 2,995 acres, Williams County has 2,091 acres, and Divide County has 1,030. Burleigh, Dunn, Golden and Billings counties each have a few hundred acres.

Big business

Bloms says Continental handles about 80 percent of the state's lentil yield.

Continental can fill up to 1,400 110-pound bags of lentils a day.

"Last month, we shipped out eight rail cars of lentils, which is 11,200 bags," Bloms says. "This month, we're looking at 12 cars. Some months, we've gone as high as 20."

That has created a need for more employees. When the company handled only small grains, it had two full-time workers and part-time help. Today, the company has seven full-time employees.

The Ray company also handles mustard crops from Canada, Montana and North Dakota and peas. Bloms says the company is planning to expand its mill capacity.

"I believe we're going to see more farmers planting alternative and specialty crops in the future," Bloms says. "It's the way to go."