Field peas fill a niche

- N.D. acreage is increasing as fewer wheat acres are planted

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JAMESTOWN, N.D. — As increasing numbers of producers cut back — or cut out — wheat acres after crop years marked by scale, poor growing conditions and low prices, they’re left with the question of “What do I plant instead?”

For some, the answer has been field peas.

Although not new to the region, producers have struggled to gain acceptance for the increasingly popular alternative crop and, over time, their efforts have paid off.

Field pea producers, grain dealers and commodity brokers gathered April 8 at a seminar entitled “Marketing Your Peas and Lentils” at the Gladstone Inn in Jamestown, N.D. The event, sponsored by the North Dakota Dry Pea and Lentil Association, addressed current and future market conditions, marketing opportunities and quality issues surrounding the crop.

Rising acres

U.S. producers currently raise an estimated 200,000 acres of field peas. While peas represent a small portion of planted acres in North Dakota, acreage steadily has increased in recent years. In 1992, North Dakotans planted 17,600 acres of peas. In 1997, they planted 85,000 acres.

Field peas often are used for feed purposes. Spain alone provides an outlet for an estimated 80,000 bushels of peas per month. Nations such as Cuba, Iran and Iraq are in the market for yellow field peas as well. Unfortunately for America’s pea producers, all these countries are subject to political or trade policies that don’t allow for the ready importation of United States-produced peas.

Price slump

Field pea prices currently are experiencing a period of decline. On a domestic level, the peas are not as readily accepted for feed purposes as corn or soybean meal. Of other, more common feed crops, soybean meal constitutes field peas’ toughest competition for a larger share of the market.

The price won’t be tremendously better than other feeds, but it’s turning into a viable feed product, at least in Canada,” says John Davenaut, a grain broker from Winnipeg, Manitoba. “The objective of the feed processor is not to make a farmer rich. That’s been the reality of the feed pea market in Canada.”

And, unlike most other agricultural commodities, pea futures are not traded.

Corn and soybean futures markets often can provide a good indication of where pea prices will go, but tracking those markets is no guarantee, says Lee Klucke of Continental Grain.

Finding widespread marketing opportunities and acceptance for peas continues to grow, although slowly.

“They’re not a new crop, but they’re traditionally exported to Europe with a small percentage going for the food market,” Davenaut says.

Strict rules for food-grade

For field peas to make it to the table rather than the feedlot, the peas must pass food processors’ and the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s quality standards.

Peas must possess the proper color characteristics and cannot show evidence of cracking, heat damage, water damage or shriveling. Likewise, little or no foreign material — dirt, for example — is allowed in food-grade peas.

The more times field peas are handled before use, the greater the quality degradation they suffer. Averaging the peas one additional time, for example, can raise the count of damaged peas in a given lot by as much as 2.5 percent. For processors, even that small percentage can mean the difference between receiving food grade price and feed-grade price.

Even with recent increases in field pea production, little change exists of flooding the market for feed peas, says Chip Steckler of ACP Grain Ltd. Including peas in crop rotation plans also can benefit crops planted on the same ground during the next growing season. Peas, a legume, improve the nitrogen content of the soil in which they are grown through a natural, nitrogen-fixing process.

An increasing number of grain elevators in the region also are making the decision to handle peas. The large majority of them, though, are equipped only to handle peas for feed purposes. Many of the peas ACP uploads at its Valley City, N.D. station, Steckler says, would pass food grade standards.

Davenaut says interest in their use is growing.

“Feedlots, dairies and some large hog farms are expressing an interest in feeding peas,” he says.

To get the most out of their pea crop, Steckler adds, producers often need to research market opportunities independently in order to find a demand that they can supply.