N.D. dry pea acres steady

By Brian Rustebakke
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Preliminary estimates indicate North Dakota's dry pea and lentil acreages will remain largely the same as last year. What's more, demand — particularly from overseas buyers — is steady and shows potential for growth.

The North Dakota Dry Pea & Lentil Association recently surveyed 729 North Dakota growers with regard to planned acreages this year. The responses tabulated so far indicate that the state's 1999 dry pea acreage likely will remain steady in relation to last year's, says Paul Thomas, administrator of NDDPA.

In 1998, farmers in the state planted 107,000 acres of dry peas as well as 22,000 acres of lentils and 3,000 acres of chickpeas. Lentil acreage for 1999 could increase to roughly 30,000 acres and chickpea acreage could increase to roughly 7,000 or 8,000 acres, Thomas says.

However, dry pea and lentil growers in the Pacific Northwest — the nation's leading region for dry pea production — may plant 25 percent fewer peas. Some of those acres may be shifted to lentil production, Thomas says, but an overall drop in U.S. pea production is likely.

Dry peas, depending on their grade, are used for both human consumption as well as livestock feed. The prices that buyers often are willing to pay for dry peas usually mirrors both soybean and corn prices.

"On the feed end, demand for peas is still very strong, although the price doesn't seem to reflect that. But you have to remember that pea prices are a basis of corn and soybean prices — they can't stand alone as a profitable crop and we're seeing a soybean glut now, as well as an oversupply of corn," Thomas says.

Majority for export

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"Right now, greens are not bringing a premium over yellow, which is not normal," Thomas says. "Usually, greens bring 25 to 30 cents over yellow."

An estimated 53 percent of U.S.-produced food-grade peas are sold in the export marketplace — to nations such as China, India and Spain. In India, peas are a common protein source often used in soups. Pea use in China often entails extracting starch from them for use in noodle making.

"I really see the market holding steady maybe some seasonal strength before harvest — but I don't expect it to move much either way," Thomas says.

Pea purchases by the U.S. government for donation abroad as part of its PL-480 program also have lent stability to dry pea markets and likely will continue to do so.

Trade mission

Export markets represent an ongoing opportunity for the region's dry pea producers. China presents ample potential for growth in the coming years, as does Spain, Spain, a leading importer of feed peas, buys between 300,000 and 600,000 metric tons annually, depending on price.

Two North Dakota pea producers recently journeyed to Spain to promote U.S.-grown peas and lentils. Cli Iseendorf of Newburg, N.D., past president of NDDPA, and D.L. Johnson of Westby, N.D., have made the trip in the past, stopping in Barcelona, Madrid and Leon.

Iseendorf says if North Dakota's 102,000