Field peas flourish in upper Midwest

By Erin Campbell
Staff Writer

Hardy legumes fair well in North Dakota

Like many crops in the upper Midwest, field peas got a late start and were bombarded with early summer heat.

"We went from instant cold to instant hot," says Dick Rolland, owner of Legume Logic in Crosby, N.D. Legume Logic introduces varieties, tests and evaluates legumes and works with growers.

Field peas are a new crop to some farmers in the region.

But production yields were excellent despite the crop narrowness. A survey showed the crop averaged 37 bushels per acre with experienced growers seeing 40 plus bushels per acre.

"We think that was pretty decent for a beginning scenario," Rolland says.

Soaring acreage

Field peas have seen a large increase in planted acreage in the last seven years.

In 1990, North Dakota farmers grew only 505 acres of field peas. About 25,000 acres were in field pea production in 1996 with the potential to hit 80,000 acres next year, if the circumstances are right.

Peas are becoming a hot item because they can be used in a wheat rotation. Field peas enhance wheat production, increase the content of soil nitrogen and improve the long-term soil quality.

Greg Endres, area agronomist with North Dakota State University’s Extension Service in Carrington, says the cool-season legumes can be planted in most areas of the state, unlike their warm-season cousins, soybeans.

Acreage has and is going to increase with field peas because of the rotational advantage they offer, Rolland says.

He says farmers are drawn to peas because they’re beginning to realize they need a rotation crop, nitrogen costs have been high and new field pea varieties are available.

Freedom to Farm also now allows farmers to seed what they choose, giving farmers more options.

Good prices

Rolland says prices for No. 1 field peas were about $6 a bushel.

The demand for peas in the edible market were large because it is one of the most popular commodities used by the government for overseas food aid.

The United States buys about 50 percent of the country’s harvested peas and with the Pacific Northwest harvesting only a half-crop due to weather, North Dakota growers saw a good share of reasonable prices.

Current field pea prices are about $5 to $6.70, but any large government tenders could bring the price back up.

But not all producers netted top dollar for their beans.

About half the North Dakota pea crop graded No. 1. The other half was plagued with chalk spot, causing the peas to be down graded. Field pea prices drop about 15 cents for each grade below No. 1.

"We’d seen it he past, but not to this extent.”

Chalk spot is a cosmetic flaw caused by mechanical damage, such as hail and pests, such as the Lygus bug.

Endres, NDsu agronomist, says problems caused by the Lygus bug are a new occurrence.

"This is the first experience where they’ve caused a problem with our crops," he says.

Rolland says he doesn’t see the bug as a long-term problem for field pea producers.

In 1990, North Dakota farmers grew only 505 acres of field peas. About 25,000 acres were in field pea production in 1996 with the potential to hit 80,000 acres next year, if the circumstances are right.

12/30/96 AgWeek (Grand Forks)