Pass lentils and peas overseas
North Dakota the leader in pulse crop production

By MIKE ALBRECHT
For the Tribune

For many Americans, lentils are a side dish in a pepperoni pizza, or a popular order at a Pizzeria on the Westside. The average American eats less than half a pound of peas and lentils each year, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. North Dakota's dry edible pea and lentil farmers are in high demand, with yields ranging from 72.5 to 78.8 percent of the crop.

According to the 2006 Annual Crop Production Summary compiled by the United States Department of Agriculture, North Dakota's dry edible pea and lentil acres were at a record high, 1,400,000 and 1,480,000, respectively. Yields were 1,350 pounds of peas per acre and 820 pounds of lentils. In the last five years, the value of peas ranged from $250 to $350 per bushel and lentils 20 to 60 cents a pound.

Most pulse crops are found in countries across the Northern Hemisphere, but the U.S. is a major producer. The U.S. is the world's largest producer of dry peas and lentils. In 2006, the U.S. produced 3.6 million metric tons of dry peas and 1.5 million metric tons of dry lentils.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, between January and October 2006, India was the No. 1 importer of dried peas, with 72.776 metric tons. Other top importers included Cuba, 42,933; Canada, 32,727; Kenya, 26,424; Spain, 22,135; Philippines, 16,088; and China, 13,148. The United States exported dried peas to 82 countries.

Top lentil consumers in the same time period were Spain, 23,404; Peru, 21,584; New Zealand, 23,498; Mexico, 17,351; and China, 15,143.

The United States imported lentils from 42 countries, with the top importers being Canada, 42,933; Cuba, 42,933; and China, 13,148. The United States exported lentils to 31 countries, with the top exporters being Canada, 42,933; China, 13,148; and Japan, 2,000.

In terms of volume and dollar value, wheat is the biggest export. Johnson said of North Dakota's crop, "But in terms of percentage of production, we've exported a very high percentage of peas and lentils."

Packaged pulses are made from beans, lentils, and peas. They are high in protein and can be a good source of nutrition for vegetarians and people with a high intake of foods high in iron. They are also a good source of antioxidants, which are substances that protect the body from damage by free radicals.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is working to increase the production of pulses in the U.S. to meet the growing demand. The USDA is also working to improve the quality and profitability of pulse crops.

"Peas and lentils were a $21 million crop in 2000 and a $150 million crop today. It's become a half-billion-dollar industry in North Dakota in the last seven years."

A. G. White, North Dakota Pulse Growers Association Marketing Director

"They're some of the oldest cultivated crops there," White said.