Lentil group says try it, like it

Booster think they're a legume up on the world

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Bismarck Tribune

The North Dakota Pea and Lentil Association wants the world to know its members can grow legumes with the best of them.

"The need for North Dakota is telling the world we can grow (peas and lentils) here and we can produce a good, quality crop," said association President Michael Youngs, Roseglen.

In recent years, the amount of North Dakota acreage devoted to peas and lentil production has more than doubled. In 1990, only 500 acres produced legumes, but 1995 acreage climbed to 22,000 and is expected to double in 1997.

The quick-growing legume market has prompted the North Dakota Pea and Lentil Association to ask the Legislature for a 1 percent assessment on lentils and peas sold in the state. Youngs said the revenue would fund marketing and legume research.

He said member growers pay dues to fund their newsletter and annual conference, but would like to see more promotion of North Dakota's peas and lentils.

Sen. John Andreick, D-Croix, supports the association and is sponsoring Senate Bill 2154, which outlines group membership and the assessment.

"It would be similar to the other ag product promotion councils," Andreick said.

Youngs said lentils are used primarily for human consumption, but peas are an excellent protein source for livestock, birds and humans.

In fact, one of the association's major goals is letting local ranchers know pea crops can be cut for hay and substituted for soybeans in livestock feed.

"We want people to realize we can grow our own feed instead of mixing soybean rations," Youngs said.

Many farmers, including Youngs, use legumes as a rotation crop with wheat and durum. Peas and lentils fertilize themselves and produce enough nitrogen to replenish the land for the next year's crop.

Youngs and his family entered the legume fray 16 years ago when a Canadian firm recruited them to produce lentils. Youngs said they tried a few acres and have been doing it ever since.

"It's a new crop in North Dakota, but it's not a new crop in agriculture," he said.

Others discovered peas and lentils out of necessity.

Dick Roland of Crosby turned to legumes during the 1980s after grasshoppers, droughts and high winds destroyed his crops.

Roland and about 30 other Crosby residents joined to find a way to save their livelihoods.

Growers worked with the Divide County extension agent and local agriculural people to research 40 different crops that could rotate with wheat.

The group conducted strip tests and found peas and lentils complemented wheat the best.

Roland said they started experimenting with peas and lentil varieties to find strains that worked well in North Dakota.

"Pretty soon it got to the point where local growers were producing peas and lentils and we needed a marketing company to introduce peas and lentils to the rest of the area," he said.

Roland created Legume Logic, a firm that tests legume varieties from all over the world and distributes them across North Dakota, Montana, Idaho and Washington.

Roland said the Crosby research continues and has yielded productive results.

"We even found peas that are fairly resistant to grasshoppers," he said.

Peas and lentils may get check off.

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