Adams, N.D., grower sees promise in peas

By Jerry W. Kram
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Paul Bernston of Adams, N.D., was selected to represent North Dakota on the U.S. Dry Pea and Lentil Council in December.

Bernston started growing field peas six years ago with 180 acres. He and his son have expanded their pea crop to 600 acres over the years. He is president of the North Dakota Dry Pea and Lentil Council, which oversees checkoff collections in the state. He will be representing North Dakota growers on the national board with growers from the Pacific Northwest.

His new position already has been quite an education, Bernston says.

"It is a big industry. The U.S. dry pea industry has seven or eight representatives all over the world pushing pulse crops into all markets globally. It is a revelation that there is that much business to be had and that much competition for it," he says.

Priorities

Bernston sees the new farm bill now being considered by Congress as the top national issues for growers. The council lobbied hard to get a marketing loan for peas and lentils, which would make the crops eligible for loan deficiency payments when prices are low. The provision wasn't included in the version of the bill passed by the House of Representatives. But is included in the bill passed by the Senate Agriculture Committee. The full Senate still is debating the bill.

"That's been the focus of all our lobbying efforts, keeping our name in front of the congressmen," Bernston says. "We were included in the Senate version, which was a big win for us. Now if we can just get it passed through the Senate, that's the next hurdle."

In North Dakota, Bernston says growers need to find a way to gain a foothold in the feed grain market. Having a loan rate for peas would help growers accomplish that.

"It would allow us to have a LDP for feed peas which would allow us to penetrate the market and compete with soybean meal, corn and barley. There is a tremendous demand for protein, especially in large hog feeding operations, and we feel we can fill those markets very nicely with a quality product," he says.

However, to compete, pea and lentil growers have to be able to offer a competitively priced product, Bernston says. Right now, feed peas are slightly more expensive than soybean meal.

"Soybean prices are down, maybe because of overproduction," Bernston says. "That's tough competition, with a lot of acres and a lot of marketing effort behind them."

Potential

Bernston says peas especially have been an important new crop for growers in North Dakota. It allows a break in crop rotations of cereal grains and oilseeds, both of which have plagued by disease and insect problems for nearly a decade in some areas. The crops also fix nitrogen, lowering fertilizer bills.

"Following our pea crops, we only apply half the nitrogen needed to grow a wheat crop, going from 100 to 120 pounds of nitrogen to maybe 40 or 50 pounds. In addition, the peas themselves don't need any additional nitrogen. So we save on the peas and on the recrop on the pea ground," Bernston says.

Bernston finds that peas have other advantages as well, two being an early harvest and improved soil tilth and health.

"Farmers are starting to realize that they can't just grow wheat on wheat or wheat on canola without building up sclerotinia or root rot diseases," he says.

Farmers also can make a profit on peas at the current price of about $4 per bushel, Bernston says. "That always is a major consideration for farmers in a period of widely depressed crop prices."

"They cash flow nicely," Bernston says. "Plus we get the agronomic benefits and the fertilizer savings, so long term, they make a good economic difference on the farm."

With new varieties that make harvesting the crop easier, Bernston says there is a large potential for growing peas in North Dakota. Peas also have a big enough world market to make a major increase in acres in the state.

"The international market for peas, especially in the Pacific Rim countries, is almost unlimited," Bernston says. "They need cheap protein and peas fill that bill. The export to India, Indonesia, the Philippines and Taiwan are enormous."

Bernston says many of those markets now go to Canada because producers there plant millions of acres of peas and the industry has the volume to make major sales. Combined with the domestic feed market, he says the sales potential for peas is tremendous.

Last year, there only were about 60,000 acres of peas grown in North Dakota. Bernston thinks there is a good chance that will increase in the future.

"We don't really know what the potential for peas is," Bernston says. "There are 3 million to 4 million acres of peas grown in Saskatchewan alone and we're still under 100,000 in North Dakota. We would like to see a million acres in North Dakota. We feel the market could easily absorb that."