Growers are feeling more optimistic about legumes

By JERRY W. KRAM
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MINOT — A lot more farmers will be growing legume crops — field peas, lentils and chickpeas — this year, according to North Dakota Dry Pea and Lentil Association.

Allen Enzie, who farms near Lehr in the south-central part of the state, said many factors are coming together to make these crops more attractive.

Low prices, high expenses and disease problems in small grains and oilseeds all make legumes look like a profitable alternative.

"We just had our association convention in the last few days and there is as much interest, if not more, in peas and lentils as there ever was," Enzie said.

"People are definitely talking about increasing lentil and chickpea acres and a lot of talk about increasing pea acres as well."

Field peas are more tolerant of wet conditions and are grown in all parts of the state. Lentils are primarily grown in the western one-third of the state while chickpeas, also called garbanzo beans, are concentrated in the southwestern counties.

One factor favoring pea and lentil production is their ability to make their own nitrogen fertilizer from the air. Nitrogen fertilizer is manufactured from natural gas.

The price of anhydrous ammonia, the cheapest nitrogen fertilizer, has nearly doubled since last fall.

"So a lot of people are looking at peas because of the high input costs for other crops this year," Enzie said.

The nitrogen fixed by the peas and lentils carry over to next year's crop, reducing the amount of fertilizer the farmer needs to apply on wheat or barley the following year.

Bryan Lannove, who farms in the Devils Lake Basin, said he likes field peas because they aren't hurt by the diseases that have plagued wheat, durum, barley, sunflowers and canola in his area.

"The peas have been fine around Devils Lake," Lannove said. "To this day, disease has been a problem (with diseases in peas) in the wet areas. With the high nitrogen costs this year it's just a no-brainer for me to put in more peas."

According to Paul Thomas, a staff person for the association, increased production in Canada has forced pea and lentil prices down in the past couple of years. However, India and Spain have made very large purchases of the crop this year and the price has started to rebound. Pressure from years of huge corn and soybean crops has hurt prices for lower grade peas that go into animal feed.

Prices for food grade peas have declined in the last three years from $7 to $9 a bushel while the crops lower production costs make it more profitable than wheat at the same price. Growers would like to see some kind of safety net in case the market collapses.

The association is also supporting a proposal by Sen. Byron Dorgan, D-N.D., that would broaden the federal farm loan program. The bill would raise the loan rate of cereal crops like wheat and barley to match the higher level of support given to oilseeds.

Pea and lentil producers would like to see their commodities be covered under the program as well.

"We don't have a loan program right now," Enzie said. "Farmers won't keep raising them if they keep getting cheap. We need a safety net so we can go to our bankers and say that we have a loan price. Most of the farmers nowadays are looking at the loan rate when they go to their banker and peas don't have that."

In warmer parts of the state, some farmers are switching from peas to soybeans because of the favorable loan rate on oilseeds.

Enzie said.