N.D. farmers harvest bumper edible pea crop

- Quality varies as wet weather takes a toll in some areas

By Ann Bailey
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Not only did North Dakota farmers plant more edible peas this year, they are harvesting above average yields.

The state's farmers will harvest 263,400 acres of edible peas, 114,000 acres more than last year, according to the National Agricultural Statistics Service.

"Yields across the state have been really good," says Eric Bartech, North Dakota Pea and Lentil Association executive director. Farmers are harvesting yields of as high as 90 to 60 bushels per acre, well above North Dakota's average of 35 bushels per acre, he says.

The cool, wet season that resulted in high yields, though, hampered the edible pea harvest. While southwestern North Dakota farmers were able to start on schedule in late July, harvest in other areas of the state further north was delayed by three to four weeks.

The yield and quality of the crop that was harvested during the first two weeks in August was good, but some edible peas that have been harvested later were bleached by the wet weather, Bartech says.

Long season

"Field peas are considered an 85-day crop like barley," says Kent McKay, crops specialist at the North Dakota State University North Central Research Extension Center in Minot. But this year, some peas were in the field for as long as 120 days, he says.

"We just couldn't get them harvested. They didn't sprout, but they weathered." The weathering turns the peas a gray color and makes them undesirable for the food market. On average, the difference between feed grade and food grade pea prices is from 40 cents to $2 per pound, McKay says.

"Last year, we saw a $2 difference between feed peas and lentils." McKay expects edible pea prices to strengthen from current levels. Sept. 30, the price of edible green peas was $6.25 to $7.33 per hundredweight, according to USDA.

Given the good edible pea year, McKay expects acreage to grow even higher in 2006.

"The pea price is going to be good. The bushels are there. The interest in field peas will grow even beyond the significant increase we saw this year," McKay predicts.

"The peas they got off early in the southwest and some parts of McLean County, N.D. and some parts of the western areas, they may not have the bushels, but they'll make up for it in quality," McKay says.

Meanwhile in northwest North Dakota, where heavy spring rains prevented some farmers from planting as much as 80 percent of their acreage, edible peas were one the crop farmers did get planted, he says.

Lentils

Lentils, meanwhile, also have been a pretty good crop for North Dakota farmers this year, despite some frost damage, Bartech says. North Dakota farmers will harvest 68,000 acres of lentils this year, 34,000 more than last year, according to the agricultural statistics service.

Montana farmers will harvest 35,000 acres this year, a 9,000-acre increase over last year, the statistics service says.

Canada, North Dakota's largest competitor for lentil markets, has had some frost damage in its pea and lentil growing region in Saskatchewan, Bartech says.