Producers say future of lentils good

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Lentils have been billed as a profitable alternative crop in North Dakota, but it may be hard to convince producers of that fact, with prices at $1.00 per hundredweight.

One official says the crop is at the low point of a 10-year cycle.

But people in the business say they're confident demand and prices will climb.

Last year, the price at Continental Grain in Ray was $1.50 per hundredweight, and the price has been as high as $2.22 back in late 1992 and early 1993. But the number of acres planted in the state has grown dramatically and the crop's supply has outgrown demand.

"Long term, yes, we could get back to those levels," Continental Grain manager Joe Blom said of last year's price.

Lentil acres in the state jumped from 1,131 in 1990 to 17,379 in 1997.

Cliff Issendorf, president of the North Dakota Dry Pea and Lentil Association, said the acres will either remain the same or increase slightly in 1998.

The reason Issendorf thinks the crop will continue to thrive is because current prices are still profitable and he said he expects prices to climb as supplies decrease.

"At 10.5 cents per pound, if you grow 1,000 pounds per acre, it's still a profit," Issendorf said. An average crop in western North Dakota is 1,300 pounds, Issendorf said. There have been years in which yields reached 1,500 pounds per acre.

"There's more available on the world market. Canada has a large supply of lentils on hand and, as time elapses, this excess supply will diminish and the price will come back," Issendorf said.

Blom said he expects the number of acres planted in Canada to decrease this year, which should also drop world supplies a little. Ending stocks in both the United States and Canada are also expected to be less next year.

Another reason prices have dropped is because demand from the U.S. food aid program has been less.

"It's 1,000 tons this year compared to 15,000 tons last year at this time," Blom said. "That's a substantial part of the business that has not been done. They've been requesting green peas so far."

Despite the pull in the market, lentils are expected to remain strong in the state, or even grow a little more.

"This crop grows especially well in western North Dakota. And it's an excellent human consumption crop," Issendorf said. "As far as market, we are our own best market, if we would just develop it and educate people to put lentils into their diet. This is another opportunity for North Dakota to go value added."

Issendorf said he was at a national lentil and dry pea conference in Spokane, Wash., and during lunch one day had a lentil burger, which was a blend of lentils and cheese.

"It was a terrific tasting meal," he said. "We have to make North Dakota citizens aware of what's available to them."