

Idaho barley production down 21 percent in 2021

By Sean Ellis

Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

POCATELLO – Idaho remains the nation’s top barley-producing state this year despite total barley production in the state decreasing by 21 percent compared with 2020.

According to USDA’s National Agricultural Statistics Service, Idaho farmers produced 43.6 million bushels of barley in 2021, down from 55 million bushels in 2020.

The decreased production was due to significantly reduced yields caused by severe drought conditions and a major early-season heat wave.

“Yields were off quite a bit from what they should have been,” said Teton farmer Dwight Little.

“All of our yields for both wheat and barley were about 60-70 percent of normal,” said Tim Dillin, who farms under dryland conditions in Bonners Ferry, which normally gets a good amount of rainfall. “We just didn’t get the spring rains we normally get and the heat just made it worse.”

Gordon Gallup, who farms under dryland conditions in Ririe, said his barley yields were way down this year. He said the lack of precipitation this year was bad enough but a string of 100-degree days in June exacerbated the situation.

“It was a combination of the drought and heat,” he said. “I never remember 100-degree temperatures in June. If there ever were, it was only for a day or two, not the whole month.”

Barley ranks No. 7 among Idaho agricultural commodities in terms of farm-gate revenue and the state’s barley farmers brought in \$260 million in farm-gate revenue last year.

About 75 percent of Idaho’s barley is malt barley that is used in the beer-brewing process, while the rest is used for human food and as animal feed.

Idaho Barley Commission Executive Director Laura Wilder said growing conditions were tough for the state’s farmers this year, between high spring winds, early hot weather and an extended severe drought.

After a cold spring, “we had a drop-off into a hot, hot summer and record-breaking heat day after day after day,” Little said. “We were breaking records every day for quite a bit of time.”

According to NASS' Small Grains 2021 Summary that was released Sept. 30, Idaho farmers harvested 490,000 acres of barley this year, down from 500,000 acres last year.

Idaho set a record for average statewide barley yield last year at 110 bushels an acre. This year, the average barley yield in Idaho dropped to 89 bushels per acre.

Despite the challenging growing season this year, Idaho retained its spot as the nation's top barley state. In fact, Idaho strengthened its hold on that spot.

According to the NASS report, Idaho produced 37 percent of the nation's total barley crop this year, up from 32 percent in 2020.

Montana came in at No. 2 in total barley production this year with 23.8 million bushels produced and North Dakota was third with 22 million bushels.

Montana farmers harvested 790,000 acres of barley this year but the average statewide yield was only 38 bushels per acre.

Farmers in North Dakota harvested 460,000 acres of barley this year but the average yield in that state was only 51 bushels an acre.

When it comes to total barley production, Idaho is the nation's leader and it's because of the state's system of reservoirs that allow for a high percentage of farming in the state to be done under irrigation.

The fact that most of Idaho's barley is produced under irrigated conditions is what makes the state such a reliable producer of barley, Wilder said.

"As bad as the 2021 crop year was, Idaho barley was fortunate to fare better than other barley-growing regions affected by drought due to our irrigation system and availability of water," she said. "That ability to irrigate our crop allows us to produce the most consistent supply of barley in the nation, even in a difficult drought year like we had in 2021."

Total U.S. barley production fell 31 percent this year, to 118 million bushels, down from 171 million bushels in 2020.

Average U.S. barley yield was 60.4 bushels per acre this year, down 22 percent from 77.2 bushels per acre last year.

Idaho, Montana and North Dakota together produced 76 percent of the nation's barley crop this year.

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