

# Idaho crop yields down significantly

By Sean Ellis

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POCATELLO – USDA’s Sept. 10 crop production report provided the first glimpse of just how harsh this year’s growing season in Idaho was.

Because of severe drought conditions and unusually high temperatures across the state, yields were expected to be down significantly for many crops.

The crop production report confirmed that.

“This is the first glimpse of a bad yield year in Idaho,” said University of Idaho Agricultural Economist Garth Taylor.

Last year’s growing season in Idaho was close to ideal in terms of water availability and weather conditions and several crops grown on a large scale in the state set records for average yield in 2020.

That won’t be the case this year.

“What a difference a year and drought and heat make,” Taylor said.

The Sept. 10 report by USDA’s National Agricultural Statistics Service shows that the average yield for large chickpeas grown in Idaho was 800 pounds per acre in 2021, down 670 pounds per acre or 46 percent compared with 2020.

Average yield for small chickpeas grown in Idaho declined from 1,870 pounds per acre in 2020 to 800 pounds per acre in 2021, a 57 percent drop.

Average yield for lentils grown in Idaho dropped 29 percent, from 1,300 pounds per acre last year to 920 pounds per acre this year, and average yield for dry edible peas declined 30 percent, from 2,500 pounds per acre in 2020 to 1,760 pounds per acre in 2021.

“Genesee” Joe Anderson, a dryland farmer in North Idaho, said yields for his canola crop were less than half of normal this year, and his wheat and pea yields were about half of normal.

Much of North Idaho typically gets a good amount of rainfall but this year was far from normal. Anderson said he feels fortunate to have got what he did this year in terms of yields given the severe drought and high temperatures farmers in his region faced in 2021.

“With no rain to speak of since Easter, I think we feel surprisingly blessed to have half a crop,” he said.

About the only major crops grown in Idaho that are expected to see higher yields this year are sugar beets and corn.

NASS' Sept. 10 report forecasts that yields for Idaho sugar beets would average 41.1 tons per acre this year, up slightly from 40.5 tons last year.

Sugar beets won't be harvested until later this fall but so far, the crop looks good, said Brad Griff, executive director of the Idaho Sugarbeet Growers Association.

"It appears the high temperatures didn't have an adverse effect on beets," he said. "We're on track for a good year."

Griff said most sugar beet farmers in Idaho had adequate water supplies this year and growers who had tight supplies prioritized water for beets if they needed to.

"Once beets get established, they are very hardy and can handle a lot of weather variations," he said.

The NASS report also forecasts yields for Idaho corn grown for grain will be up slightly, from 199 bushels per acre in 2020 to 209 bushels per acres this year.

"Corn does well when it gets hot," Taylor said.

Yield estimates for other major Idaho crops will be released later but they likely won't be great.

Idaho potato growers expect yields to be down significantly.

Taylor said he spoke with an Idaho onion grower who expects his onion yields to be down at least 25 percent this year.

"He's singing the blues. It's not good," Taylor said.

Yields for both barley and wheat grown in Idaho set records last year but this year will be a very different story.

The average yield for wheat grown in Idaho was 96.7 bushels per acre last year, which was 5 percent greater than the previous record of 91.9 bushels per acre set in 2018.

Idaho barley yields averaged a record 110 bushels per acre last year, beating the previous record of 107 bushels per acre set in 2016.

Idaho Barley Commission Executive Director Laura Wilder said that based on grower reports, average barley yields in Idaho will be down 15-25 percent in 2021 compared with 2020.

Members of Idaho's wheat industry expect yields to decline in the 20 percent range.

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