

Idaho barley crop is big and it looks nice

By Sean Ellis

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POCATELLO – Idaho’s 2022 barley crop is on track to be much bigger than it was in 2021.

Idaho leads the United States in barley production and produces about a third of the nation’s total crop.

Last year’s severe drought conditions resulted in yields and total production for most of the state’s main crops, including barley, falling far below normal.

But Idaho’s barley crop has bounced back nicely this year and USDA estimates total barley production in the state will be up 43 percent this year compared with last year.

“I’ve been out to a lot of the growing regions around the state and, yes, there’s a lot of barley out there and it looks good,” said Idaho Barley Commission Executive Director Laura Wilder. “We are cautiously optimistic it will be a strong year for Idaho barley.”

Barley harvest in the state is underway and growers and industry representatives are reporting strong yields and good quality.

Farmers are reporting that barley yields on irrigated farmland could be 15-30 bushels an acre above average, said Jason Boose, regional manager for Molson Coors.

“Quality-wise, it looks like a great crop,” he said. “It’s plump, bright, and there’s not a lot of disease issues. There are a lot of acres out there and it looks like yields are there, too.”

A lot of winter barley has been harvested and many growers are just getting started on spring-planted barley.

“The winter barley looked fantastic,” said Andy Hohwieler, regional manager for Scoular Co., an agribusiness company that contracts with Idaho farmers to grow barley. “We’re just getting into spring barley and it looks like it’s going to be a good crop as well.”

Rupert farmer Mike Wilkins expects his 2022 barley yields to be much higher than they were last year.

“We’re going to be substantially better than what we were last year,” he said. “If our grain doesn’t make it to 150 bushels an acre, it will be a pretty big disappointment.”

Idaho farmers harvested 490,000 acres of barley last year and yields around the state averaged 89 bushels an acre, well below normal. Idaho produced a total of 43.6 million bushels of barley in 2021, which was 21 percent lower than the 2020 total.

USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service estimates Idaho farmers will harvest 560,000 acres of barley in 2022 and yields will average 111 bushels an acre. That yield average would be a record if realized, just nipping the previous record of 110 bushels an acre set in 2020.

NASS estimates Idaho farmers will produce 62 million bushels of barley in 2022.

Some irrigated winter barley fields in Idaho saw average yields above 200 bushels an acre, Hohwieler said.

Idaho farmers planted more barley acres than normal this year, partly as a result of the potential bad water year that was shaping up earlier this year, before growers planted their crops.

Since then, the water situation has improved significantly, but at the time some farmers obviously saw barley, which is a low-water crop, as an attractive option, Wilder said.

"Some growers switched to barley just because barley requires less water than other crops," she said. "In a low water year especially, barley is a good choice."

Earlier in the year, a lot of growers were concerned about a potential severe drought in 2022, Boose said. "I think that flipped a lot of acres late in planting. Growers were concerned about having enough water."

"Barley is a good option and water is one of the principal considerations when growers are deciding what to plant year in and year out," Hohwieler said. "It fit really well into a lot of growers' rotations this year."

About 70 percent of the barley grown in Idaho is malt barley that is used in the beer-brewing process. That barley is purchased by beer companies.

Idaho farmers typically grow enough malt barley each year to produce 12 million barrels of beer or 4.1 billion 12-ounce bottles of beer.

The rest of the barley grown in Idaho is used for human food or animal feed.

Contract prices for malt barley are up significantly and that also played a role in barley acres rising in Idaho this year, Wilkins said.

"I think it was a combination of the higher price and the water situation," he said.

Idaho's barley industry has a major impact on the state's economy and a good barley year is a good thing for Idaho's overall economy.

According to a study commissioned by the IBC that was released this year, the state's barley industry contributes about \$274 million to Idaho's total gross state product each year and is responsible for \$551 million in total sales. It also supports 2,698 jobs in Idaho.

05 Aug 2022