

Idaho is top barley state. Again

By Sean Ellis

Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

POCATELLO – Idaho’s barley crop declined in volume by 8 percent this year compared with last year, but the state still led the nation in total barley production, by a significant margin.

Last year, Idaho farmers produced the state’s second largest barley crop ever, at 60.5 million bushels. USDA’s National Agricultural Statistics Service estimates Idaho’s barley crop this year at 55.6 million bushels.

While the 2024 barley crop is smaller than 2023, it looks good, said Rupert farmer Mike Wilkins.

“We had a really good, strong crop,” he said. “Yields and quality were good. Everything was good.”

He said a tough, cold spring posed a challenge for all crops, including barley.

“But then it turned hot and things took off,” he added.

“We had a really good barley crop and good yields,” said Teton farmer Dwight Little.

After the challenging spring, “We had ideal weather,” he added. “It was just a real pleasant growing season.”

While Idaho’s barley production declined in 2024, the state’s percentage of the nation’s total barley production actually went up, significantly.

According to NASS, Idaho farmers produced 39 percent of the nation’s barley supply this year, up from 33 percent last year.

Idaho barley yields, including both irrigated and dryland acres, averaged 109 bushels per acre, down from the record 112 last year.

Montana produced 36 million bushels of barley this year, placing them as the nation’s No. 2 barley state, and North Dakota came in at No. 3 with 21 million bushels.

Montana had more harvested barley acres than Idaho – 710,000 compared with 510,000 – but Montana farmers averaged 51 bushels an acre compared with Idaho’s 109.

North Dakota farmers harvested 285,000 acres of barley and averaged 74 bushels per acre.

Total U.S. barley production in 2024 is estimated at 144 million bushels, down 23 percent from last year. U.S. barley acres averaged 77 bushels per acre.

Montana's barley production declined by 28 percent this year and North Dakota's production was down 49 percent.

Idaho has led the nation in barley production every year since 2016.

Idaho has a much higher percentage of irrigated barley acres, which is what separates the Gem State from other major barley-growing states, Wilkins said.

Idaho's climate is ideal for growing barley, but irrigation is the big difference-maker, he said.

"The No. 1 thing is, we're irrigated," Wilkins said. "That's why we have consistent yields and quality."

"Throughout the Snake River plain, we have a good supply of water that other places don't," said Soda Springs barley farmer Scott Brown, who has served as president of the National Barley Growers Association.

That said, he added, the state does also have the climatic conditions necessary for quality, high-yielding barley.

"We definitely have the climate," he said. "It takes warm days and cool nights to grow barley and Idaho is blessed with those kinds of weather conditions."

Over the past 10 years, Idaho has averaged 54.7 million bushels of barley with an average yield of 106 bushels per acre. The state has also averaged growing 35 percent of the nation's total barley supply during that period.

Idaho's record barley production was 62 million bushels in 2016.

About 70 percent of the barley produced in Idaho is malt barley, which is a critical part of the beer-brewing process. The rest is used for human food or animal feed.

Although Idaho had another nice barley crop this year, the prices that farmers are receiving for their barley have come down off of record highs.

"We'd like to have better prices, but they are what they are," Wilkins said.

Some production costs, such as fuel and fertilizer, have come down a little but prices are dropping much faster, Brown said.

"Fuel and fertilizer and all your inputs haven't come down as much as the price," he said.

25 Oct 2024