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Pulse facility fully operational

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WILLISTON – U.S. Department of Agriculture reports are suggesting fewer pulse acres in North Dakota in 2008, but that doesn't alarm Eric Bartsch in the least.

Bartsch, general manager of United Pulse Trading Inc., said the soaring cost of fertilizer coupled with continued strong market values for pulse commodities will bring at least as many, if not more, pulse acres than a year ago.

"Peas more than lentils, but the scenario is there for us to maintain our acres," said Bartsch, who oversees marketing, grain merchandising, processing and operations. "Market value is going to help us, too."

The pulse facility was closed for part of the winter because of extensive damage from a Dec. 8, 2007, fire. The plant in Williston's industrial park reopened Feb. 4, but ran at partial capacity through February.

"We're now back up and running and moving product out," Bartsch said. "We're cleaning peas and splitting lentils."

Spring's work shouldn't have a negative impact on production and shipping, according to Bartsch, although there is a caveat that this is the first spring the Canadian company is operating in the United States.

"We're running at the normal pace," Bartsch said. "It's obviously tougher to buy this time of year, but we've secured enough to operate through the spring."

United Pulse is a subsidiary of Saskcan Pulse Trading Inc., a Regina, Sask., company that recently went to public trading on the Toronto Stock Exchange.

Murad Al-Katib is the president and CEO of Saskcan Pulse. He said the North Dakota pulse industry is maturing and global players like Saskcan Pulse will be able to get North Dakota legumes into every corner of the world. In 2007, the

Article Photos



Submitted Photo

The United Pulse Trading Co., in Williston, is now fully operational following a December 2007 fire that shut the pea and lentil processor down for two months followed by a month of partial production.

Fact Box

Top pulse producers

Williams, Divide, McKenzie and Mountrail counties are the top pea and lentil growing regions in North Dakota. In fact, Williams County accounts for roughly half the lentils produced in the state.

Williams County producers, according to the Farm Service Agency in Fargo, grew nearly 54,000 acres of lentils in 2007, followed by Divide County with 28,000 acres.

A similar total plays out with pea production. Divide County led all counties last year with 64,000 acres, followed by McLean, Mountrail and Williams.

The state produced 511,000 acres of peas, 106,000 acres of lentils and about 15,000 acres of chickpeas in 2007. North Dakota recently replaced Idaho as the leading lentil-producing state in the nation.

company traded peas, lentils and chickpeas in 85 countries.



Al-Katib said the price of nitrogen is going to lead to more stable production of legumes in North Dakota, but a shortage of protein around the world is going to keep world market values stable for the foreseeable future.

Al-Katib, a Turk who grew up in the rural community of Davidson, Sask., where his father was a family doctor, said northwest North Dakota producers are getting excited about “energy rotations,” which are to use legumes following cereal grains and oilseeds more often to help cut the high cost of nitrogen inputs.

“The global protein crisis is real and the world is looking for protein,” Al-Katib said. “And peas and lentils, with their excellent rotational benefits, will drive the crops in North Dakota and eastern Montana. Legumes are a good follow-on to canola or durum and that’s what excites me about North Dakota.”

Bartsch, who maintains a trading office headquarters in Bismarck, said the Williston plant is the ideal location for a global pulse facility, given the availability of pulse acres and the fact that Williston is on a main east-west Burlington Northern Santa Fe rail line. Bartsch travels between Bismarck and Williston regularly.

“One of the reasons that attracted us was logistics,” he said. “Williston is on the main line and rail cars are readily available. Secondly, it was the growing region. A 100-mile radius of Williston is the heart of the pea and lentil growing region in the United States.”

The steel rail connects Williston to Seattle, Tacoma, Wash., and Houston, which, according to Al-Katib, will lead to more private markets for North Dakota producers.

“We ship all over the world and to the USDA Food Aid program,” Bartsch said. “It’s a selling opportunity to USDA. We have locations in Canada, the U.S.A. and Australia, but we ship all over the world.”

Twenty people are employed in Williston in the former Missouri River Ag Processing facility, which is located in the Williston Industrial Park east of town along N.D. Highway 1804. Four employees work at the sales office headquarters in Bismarck, including Bartsch, who spent six years as the executive director of the Northern Pulse Growers Association before joining United Pulse in 2007.

The assets of Missouri River Ag were purchased from the Knudson family of Crosby, and following the fire caused by a dust system explosion, \$2 million was spent on upgrades, according to Al-Katib. But now the plant is retrofitted for larger-scale production.

“We’ll see expansion in Williston and throughout the state. That’s our blueprint in Saskatchewan and we will replicate that in North Dakota,” Al-Katib said. “Look for us to acquire existing plants in North Dakota because we want to reach into the eastern part of the state.”

Al-Katib said the fire was unfortunate since it happened just a couple of months after the plant opened as United Pulse. Ironically, high fertilizer prices are spreading optimism through this plant as much as the equipment upgrades. He said the internal forecast is calling for more production in 2008.

“The optimism is higher now than when we began,” Al-Katib said. “We’re bigger after the fire since we added on. This year will be good. It will be a good opportunity for pulse producers in North Dakota.”

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