Idaho growers increase corn acreage in 2011

The Associated Press

Idaho growers set a record for the number of acres devoted to corn in 2011, according to national agricultural figures.

Across the state, farmers planted an estimated 390,000 acres of corn, a 21.8 percent increase compared to 2010 and enough to enable corn acreage to surpass potatoes, the state's signature crop, according to figures released by the National Agricultural Statistics Service.

Producers and farm officials say the increase was fueled by higher commodity prices and a boost in demand for corn silage from dairy producers.

Caldwell-area farmer Sid Freeman said he increased his corn production by 20 percent this year. One factor was crop rotation strategies, but Freeman says it the economy also drove his decision.

"It so happens that the markets are pretty decent right now," Freeman told the Idaho Business Review (http://bit.ly/qzHpbH) last week.

Freeman said his profit margin on corn has increased about 5 percent this year.

The bulk of the corn harvested in the state this year will be used for silage, a key component of animal feed and chopped in a pre-grain form. Most of the silage will be directed to dairy operations, said Vince Matthews, NASS field office director. Idaho milk production was up 3.9 percent in August compared to the same month a year ago.

Corn harvested simply for grain is used for ethanol production. Idaho's corn harvest of corn for ethanol production was 130,000 acres this year, up from 110,000 a year ago, according to NASS.

Farm experts predict corn production in the state will continue to grow, thanks to demand and development of seeds better suited to the climate.

Idaho Farm Bureau Spokesman John Thompson says companies are introducing seeds that perform well in Idaho's Upper Snake River valley, which offers growers a shorter season. Growing silage corn in this region of the state was simply not feasible a decade ago.

"It doesn't take nearly as much babysitting as potatoes, sugar beets or alfalfa, for example," Thompson said. "And it's good to have another crop in the rotation — good for the soil."

The rise of corn is not perceived as a threat to those in Idaho's potato world.

"It's not how many acres, but how many we harvest and what we can sell them for," said Frank Muir, president and CEO of the Idaho Potato Commission.

Last year, growers planted 295,000 acres of potatoes, the lowest level in 30 years and down from 320,000 in 2009.

Corn and potatoes still trail wheat, with 1.45 million acres planted this year, and barley, with 510,000 acres.

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