Hummus Demand Drives Chickpea Growth

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SPOKANE, Wash. (AP) — The rising popularity of hummus across the nation has been good for farmers like Aaron Flansburg.

Flansburg, who farms 1,900 acres amid the rolling hills of southeastern Washington, has been increasing the amount of the chickpeas used to make hummus by about one-third each year to take advantage of good prices and demand.

"I hope that consumption keeps increasing," he said.

Lawmakers in the nation's capital hope so, too. The new federal Farm Bill contains two provisions that are intended to boost consumption of chickpeas even more, along with their companion, so-called pulse crops peas and lentils.

Acreage devoted to chickpeas has exploded in the past decade in Washington and Idaho, which grow some two-thirds of the nation's supply. Chickpeas require little water, and that's a major plus in the dry region, Flansburg said.

"They work pretty well in our region," he said.

In the Palouse region, which straddles both states, there are more than 150,000 acres producing chickpeas today, up from about 12,000 acres in 2000, said Todd Scholz of the USA Dry Pea and Lentil Council, the trade group for the nation's growers.

Chickpeas, also known as garbanzo beans, are also grown in California, Montana, North Dakota and other states, he said.

Historically, about 70 percent of the chickpea crop in this region was exported each year, Flansburg said. But that has changed because of the rising domestic demand for hummus, he said.

"That's a good thing to have that balance," he said.

The majority of the nation's supply is consumed domestically, mostly in the form of hummus, Scholz said.

Farmers are currently getting about 28 to 30 cents a pound for chickpeas, which is an average price for recent years, Flansburg said. He's seen prices top 50 cents per pound, but a big crop in India this year has pushed prices down a bit, he said.

Flansburg doesn't expect to expand chickpea production much more. He also produces high-value dry peas and lentils.

Hummus, once an exotic Middle Eastern food that was hard to find, is now sold in grocery stores, big and small. Often used by the health-conscious as a dip or spread, it can now be found in about 20 percent of the nation's households, Scholz said.

That leaves plenty more room for growth, he said.

For instance, hummus is in about 98 percent of households in Israel, he said.

Retail sales of hummus increased to $250 million in 2013, up from $192 million in 2007 and just $5 million in 1997, said U.S. Sen. Maria Cantwell, D-Wash., who helped push the Farm Bill provisions on chickpeas.

It should get even more popular as school children are introduced to the food, she said. The bill includes a pilot program in which the U.S. Department of Agriculture will spend $10 million over five years to purchase pulse crops to use in school breakfasts and lunches.

Pulse crops are cheap, and loaded with protein, fiber and other nutrients, Scholz said. Flours made from pulse crops can be added to breads, tortillas and pastas to enhance their nutritional value.

Mead High School near Spokane serves garbanzo beans, lentils and hummus as part of school meals. "They are a less expensive protein source so it stretches our dollars," said Kim Elkins, Mead School District nutrition director.

Cantwell said the growth of the chickpea market will also help bring more jobs to Washington state.

The state's pulse crop industry employs an estimated 5,000 people in processing, growing or moving the crops, Cantwell said. Eastern Washington has about 1,000 farm families and 22 processors working in pulse crops.

The Farm Bill also provides $25 million per year over five years to study the health benefits of pulse crops.

Once those health benefits are established, the trade group said Washington state would double the acreage devoted to dry peas, lentils and chickpeas over the next decade.

Pulse crops have been around since biblical times, said Kim Murray, a Montana grower and group's chair.

"In this day and age, we need scientific research and human studies to quantify just how healthy these crops promise to be," she said.

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