

Crops

Sunflowers reap profit in Colorado

By KINDRA GORDON

'SUNFLOWERS have been a great market for us over the last 10 years. They are a nice cash crop," says Colorado farmer David Ruppel, who has been raising sunflowers for the past 12 to 13 years.

Ruppel and his three sons, Paul, 31; Ryan, 27; and Chad, 23, own and operate



FATHER AND SONS: Father David and sons Paul, Ryan and Chad grow confection sunflower for the large-seed export market.

Ruppel Farms, which encompasses 4,000 acres of farm ground around Keenesburg, Colo. Along with confection sunflowers, they grow winter wheat, sugarbeets, pinto beans, shell corn, alfalfa and grass hay.

In 2010, the Ruppels planted 900 acres of sunflowers in their rotation. The crop is grown with pivot irrigation. Even though irrigation is used, Ruppel says he turned to sunflowers years ago because "they are a crop that can get by with less water."

Ruppel also likes that sunflowers provide options within his crop rotations. He typically uses a three-year rotation of corn-sugarbeets-sunflowers.

Export niche

Since he started raising sunflowers, Ruppel has contracted his crop through North Dakota-based Red River Commodities. The delivery point to a Red River receiving station is just eight to 15 miles from Ruppel's fields, and he says, "That's worked well because we do not have enough on-farm storage."

He credits Red River Commodities with being progressive in expanding domestic and international markets for the seeds that are roasted and eaten. Red River Commodities operates its own roasting and flavoring production facility called SunGold Foods in Horace, N.D.

Ruppel says, "Red River is always looking at more markets, and the European market has been growing." Ruppel and his sons witnessed the international interest firsthand when visitors from Spain viewed sunflower test plots at Ruppel Farms in September.

A primary reason for Spain's interest in Colorado sunflowers is the size of the seed. Ruppel explains, "In Europe, people eat sunflowers one at a time; therefore, they like seeds that are three-quarters of an inch to an inch in length."

He adds, "The High Plains region of Colorado and Kansas are unique because we are one of the few places a larger-size sunflower seed is produced that they are able to export for those markets."

The contract price for sunflowers offered by Red River Commodities hinges on the export market as well as being influenced by the corn market. There is a price split with large seeds bringing about 10 to 15 cents more per pound than smaller seeds. Ruppel says 75% to 85% of his sunflowers make the large-seed qualifications.

Two years ago he had his best price ever at 37 cents per pound for the large seeds.

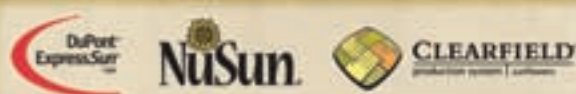
Given the growing market potential, Ruppel intends to keep confection sunflowers as a part of his operation.

Gordon is a Whitewood, S.D., writer.

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