

Agriculture

Panhandle agriculture is a diverse conglomerate of livestock and crops. Over 4,500 proprietors manage almost 12,000 square miles and generate over a billion dollars in annual gross sales.

The Panhandle's land and water resources are key to the region's agricultural productivity. Elevation ranges from 5,400 ft in the southwest to 3,600 ft in the North Platte Valley. The area is classified as semi-arid with 12 to 17 inches of annual precipitation. Reservoirs on the North Platte River in Wyoming capture snow melt that is delivered to over 325,000 acres of ditch-irrigated land in the valley.



An additional 325,000 acres are irrigated with ground water delivered through center pivots.

The livestock industry accounts for two thirds of the gross agricultural sales in the Panhandle. Over 65% of Panhandle land is available for grazing and supports over 250,000 beef cows. Panhandle feedlots finish approximately 700,000 head annually. There are no major livestock processing facilities in the Panhandle.



The primary irrigated crops for the Panhandle are corn and alfalfa. Corn generates annual gross sales in excess of \$140 million. Alfalfa hay is marketed regionally with a large share going to the dairy industry in the Colorado front range.

Additionally, a number of specialty crops are



unique to the Panhandle of Nebraska.

Sugarbeets, for example, are grown on 40-50,000 acres of Panhandle cropland. The beet crop typically generates \$70-80 million in gross revenue. The beet crop is processed by Western Sugar, a grower-owned cooperative with factories in Scottsbluff and Torrington, WY. In addition to sugar extraction, the Scottsbluff facility includes an extensive packaging facility and a molasses desugarization plant. The gross value of sugar processing to the Panhandle exceeds \$80 million per year and provides over 500 full and part-time jobs.

Dry, edible beans are also unique crops to western Nebraska. Acreages range from 150,000 to 200,000 with the Panhandle representing over 70 percent of the state's production. Nebraska ranks first in the U.S. in Great Northern production and third in Pintos. Dry, edible bean production is valued at over \$70 million annually.

Our dry, edible beans are cleaned and packaged



by four major bean processors in the Panhandle. Bean processing accounts for approximately \$80 million in gross sales. Foreign markets are vital in marketing Nebraska's dry beans. Over one-half of the Great Northerns and up to one-third of the Pintos are exported.

Corn is produced on about 300,000 acres.



Most of this corn is fed to beef cattle, although two area ethanol facilities are demanding more of the crop.

Panhandle **potato** production is relatively small

(10,000 acres) compared to other specialty crops but is valued at over \$20 million annually.

Over two million Panhandle acres are devoted to dryland (rain-fed) agriculture. Given the semi-arid climate, most dryland farmers practice a two or three year crop rotation, allowing for a fallow period to conserve moisture prior to wheat planting. The predominant dryland areas are in the southern Panhandle with some acreage in the central and northern regions.



Hard, red winter wheat dominates the dryland cropping system with more than 800,000 acres in production. One third of Nebraska's wheat production occurs in the Panhandle and is valued at \$60 million.

Proso Millet is produced on about 60,000 acres. Proso is the only millet grown as a grain crop in the United States. It can be ground and fed to livestock, as it is high feed value. Proso is also used for poultry and bird seed and for export markets.

Sunflowers are produced on about 100,000 acres and are used for confection, oil and bird seed. Much of our proso and sunflower production goes to



PennPak III, a birdseed processing and packaging facility in Sidney, Nebraska.

Recent challenges in production agriculture have forced many farmers to consider other emerging crops. Wine grapes, garbanzo beans, turfgrass seed, white wheat and organic crops are a few examples of crops being grown in the Panhandle on a limited but



expanding basis.

Panhandle agriculture is an important, diverse and interesting segment of our economy.

The combination of crop and livestock production with extensive processing facilities provides much of the economic and employment base for the region.

Efforts to diversify our economy are important. Land and people, however, will continue to be our most precious resources.

