



John O'Connell/Capital Press

Rexburg, Idaho, farmer Nathan Ashcraft looks over his 40-acre field of spelt on July 28, deciding it's ready to harvest. He's one of Idaho's few spelt producers.

## East Idaho grower finds niche with spelt

By JOHN O'CONNELL  
Capital Press

SUGAR CITY, Idaho — Nathan Ashcraft's website — [histakes-spelt.com](http://histakes-spelt.com) — is a testament to the gamble of experimenting with a novel specialty crop.

In the late 1990s, the Sugar City farmer stuck to the basics, raising two years of wheat followed by potatoes. Nowadays, the rotation on his 900-acre farm is unique and diversified, including 40 acres of spelt, which is a healthful, ancient grain.

According to the most current Idaho Farm Service Agency records, only one other grower in the state produced spelt in 2015 — an Oneida County farmer who raised 80 acres. USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service keeps no records on spelt production.

Ashcraft's spelt generates about \$42 per 50-pound sack, which is far better than he's been getting paid for wheat. But he's had to be patient in growing his spelt acreage, easing toward a goal of producing a full pivot within the next decade.

"It only takes a few acres more to over-plant and kill your market," Ashcraft said. "We did that in 2008. Our acres went from 40 to 80, and we ended up sitting on the grain for four years, and finally having to sell it to a feeder."

His brother and former farming partner, Blaine, started raising spelt in 2003, hoping to carve a niche product known for its low glycemic index and healthful folic acid.

"He was looking into ways that he could improve his health," Ashcraft said.

They chose a Midwestern fall variety with good milling quality and an ability to tolerate harsh winters.

Blaine moved to Alaska to start his own farm, and Ashcraft is in his second season of raising spelt on his own. It yields about 3,000 pounds per acre, requiring about the same inputs as soft white wheat but



John O'Connell/Capital Press

Ashcraft plans to expand his spelt production, but not too rapidly.

less water. Ashcraft said spelt grows tall and is prone to tipping over, or lodging. At harvest, he simply separates the heads from the stalk, noting threshing tends to crack the seeds.

Ashcraft has been sending his spelt to Havre, Mont., for de-hulling, but local seed cleaner Jeremiah Clark has ordered a special machine to de-hull it locally, which should present a considerable cost savings.

Ashcraft also raises potatoes, seed peas, alfalfa, milling wheat, forage wheat and a dozen steers, and his wife, Jamie, and four sons oversee a 1-acre vegetable patch yielding an assortment of produce. They sell their vegetables and supplemental fruit at farmers' markets in Driggs and Idaho Falls, and from a self-service vegetable stand in their front yard, operating as The Food Dudes.

Jamie also markets her husband's spelt. It's shipped direct to customers, mostly in 2-pound bags, and sold to a short list of bakeries, food co-ops and health food stores. Their largest customer is Kitchen Kneads, based in Utah.

Jamie said her customers order from as far away as Belize, often believing spelt's delicate type of gluten is easier to digest. She also enjoys the opportunity to bring back a grain from the past and to "try new things." She teaches occasional spelt baking lessons.

"It's been a lot of education on my part. I've had to educate people on what (spelt) is and what to do with it," she said.

## Surplus drives down processing tomato prices and production

By TIM HEARDEN  
Capital Press

ARBUCKLE, Calif. — Processing tomato growers are stepping up their harvest of a crop whose acreage is diminished, not so much because of drought but because of global market conditions.

Tomato processors secured contracts for 13 million tons of tomatoes this season, down more than 9 percent from last year's contracted production, as this year's 262,000 acres of processing tomatoes is nearly 12 percent below 2015, according to the National Agricultural Statistics Service.

Growers and industry representatives say a surplus of tomatoes on the world market prompted processors to cut back on planned purchases. Global production this year is about 7.5 percent below last year, said Mike Montna, the California Tomato Growers Association's president and chief executive officer.

"Planted acreage is down mainly because of market conditions," said Arbuttle, Calif., grower Darrin Williams, a CTGA board member. "Processors were long in inventory going into this season, and there have been quite a few cutbacks on acreage on acreage because of that. We had a big world crop last year, and this year we're down a couple million tons from last year."

Drought continues to have an impact — particularly in the western San Joaquin Valley, where federal surface-water allocations were just 5 percent of requested supplies this year, Montna said.

"For them, the drought is as



Tim Hearden/Capital Press

Freshly picked tomatoes fill a bin. The harvest of a smaller processing tomato crop is underway in California, as acreages are down because of a glut of tomatoes on the global market.

real as it's been in the last three years," he said. "It's more insurance water, not farming water. It's in case a pump goes out or a well goes down. ... It's not enough to really farm tomatoes with."

"We're seeing the impact ... of multiple years of well water" on quality and yields, he said. "Obviously we'd like some fresh water to blend, but we don't have that ability now with the allocation."

Harvests of early tomatoes started in mid-July and are expected to ramp up in the coming weeks. Williams said he's about 20 percent done with his harvest, and he's so far seen good yields and quality.

So far, northern parts of the state are at or slightly above contracted levels, Southern California growers are at or slightly below their contracts and Central California is just getting started, he said. Dis-

ease pressure has caused troubles in some fields, he said.

"Everyone has a problem field this year, whereas last year was good across the board," Williams said.

With leftover inventories of tomatoes in warehouses, prices to growers fell from \$80 per ton last year to about \$72.50 per ton in 2016, meaning growers will need some high yields to do more than break even, the California Farm Bureau Federation reported. At the same time, lesser yields could push prices back up, growers say.

Fresno County leads the state with 80,800 acres of processing tomatoes contracted in 2016, followed by Yolo, Kings, San Joaquin and Merced counties, according to NASS. The top five counties make up 73 percent of the state's total contracted acres, the agency reported.

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