



FIRST ALBERTA REGIONAL VARIETY TRIALS OF ORGANIC PEAS PLANNED FOR THIS YEAR



Peas growing for 2019 trials by Mackenzie Applied Research Association (MARA).

This year's Alberta regional variety trials (RVTs) will include results for organic pulses for the first time.

Alberta Pulse Growers (APG) teamed up with Mackenzie Applied Research Association (MARA) to test organic yellow and green peas in Fort Vermilion in response to a dramatic increase in Alberta organic pulse growers, many of which are in Mackenzie County.

"We anticipate that varieties will respond differently under organic management compared to conventionally grown peas," said Dr.

Jenn Walker, APG Research Manager. "Until now there hasn't been a lot of information to assist in variety selection for organic pulse growers. We expect that this organic variety trial will be useful in supporting pulse production in Mackenzie County."

APG Zone 4 Director Caroline Sekulic agreed that the undertaking is a timely one for the northern zone.

"The Peace Country has many acres of organic land and peas would provide a valuable rotation," Sekulic said. "Organic oats have

been popular, but several farmers are betting on peas this year. Fractionation and pulse protein in the organic sector will have many opportunities."

APG recently experienced a significant increase in the number of organic pulse farmers becoming members of the organization by paying the service fee.

APG's membership currently includes 126 organic growers who paid \$138,844 in levies last year on 23,530 tonnes of pulses sold, which were primarily peas. Organic growers do not make up a very big percentage of APG's 6,500 grower members, but the increase from a handful of organic growers in recent years is worth noting. There are more than 20 organic buyers listed on APG's online Dealer List to accommodate these growers.

Good prices related to a growing demand from consumers is a big reason for the increase. Much of the growth in Alberta also comes from a significant amount of land that hadn't been farmed before being sold in the Mackenzie County area of northern Alberta.

"Organic production in Mackenzie County continues to grow substantially," said Samuel Peparah, MARA Manager and Research Coordinator. "The county now has over 272 certified growers, an increase of 44 producers from 2017 to 2018. Mackenzie County has 41% of the total organic operations in Alberta. Based on the local needs assessment and Alberta government shift in policy to farmer led research, MARA has identified



MARA Manager Samuel Peprah.

crop and market diversification as priority areas that will contribute to the growth and resiliency of the organic sector as a whole in Mackenzie County.”

A report from the Prairie Organic Grain Initiative indicates that Alberta stands out as an emerging leader in

Canada’s organic sector. Consumer demand for Alberta’s organic food is growing locally and internationally. The substantial and rapid growth of organic production provides both opportunities and challenges.

“In order to bridge the bottleneck between local demand and local production, it is important to invest in organic research that seeks to improve crop production, quality and diversification, and provide marketing and agronomy support, to help growers be successful,” Peprah noted. “As farmers begin to better understand how to improve crop quality and understand buyer requirements, this could lead to new markets.”

He explained that MARA is the only agricultural research institution based in Mackenzie County providing unbiased and innovative research and extension relevant to the agro-climatic conditions.

“The substantial growth of organic farmers in the county and the increasing demand for organic foods made it necessary for MARA

to convert portions of its land to organic by conducting trials and providing data to local producers and Western Canada as a whole,” Peprah said, adding that MARA has collaborated with AAFC-Brandon, University of Manitoba, Grain Millers and Organic Alberta to conduct breeding programs and variety trials to support the organic industry.

At press time, Peprah said that MARA planned to start seeding the organic peas in mid-May on the east side of MARA’s research farm. He noted that unlike the conventionally grown pulses where seeds are treated, and herbicide, fungicide and/or desiccant are applied, none of these are applied in organic RVTs.

In the organic RVTs, seeding rates are increased by 50 to 75% to suppress weeds and compensate for seeds which could be attacked or affected by insect pests and diseases.

The RVT results will be shared with growers as they become available after harvest via the APG app and at albertapulservt.com.



Organic yellow peas growing on a farm in Mackenzie County in 2019.