PRICES

35 YEARS OF CHANGES

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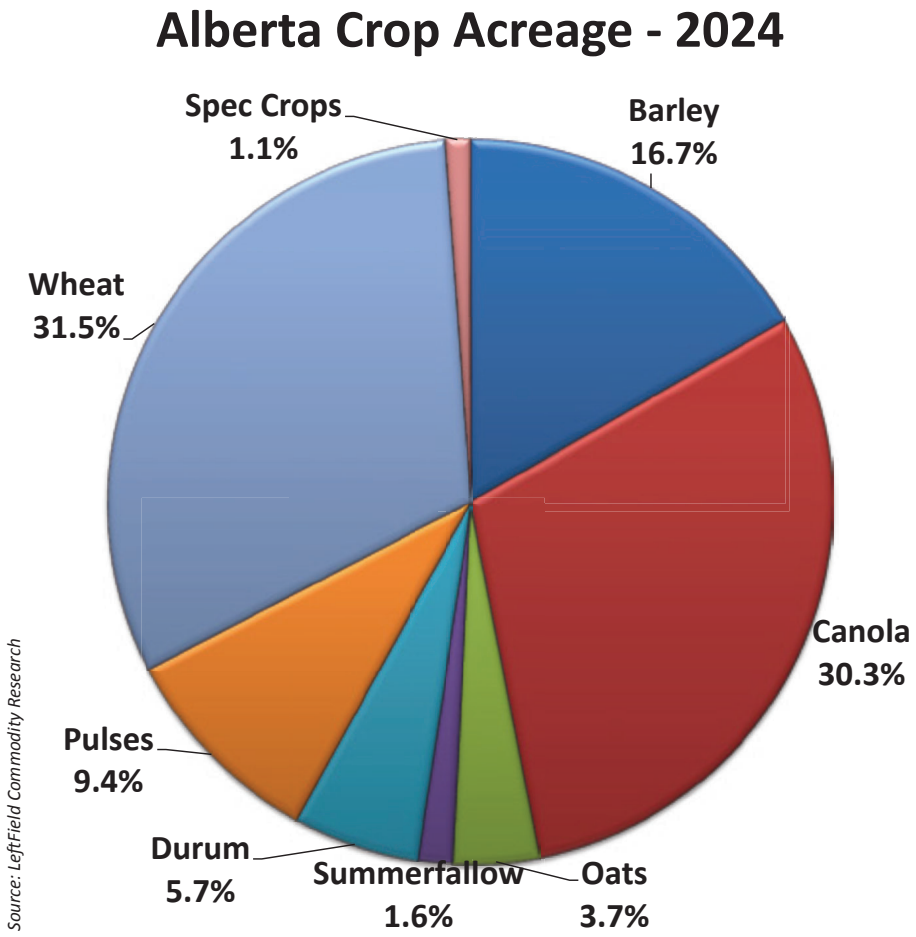


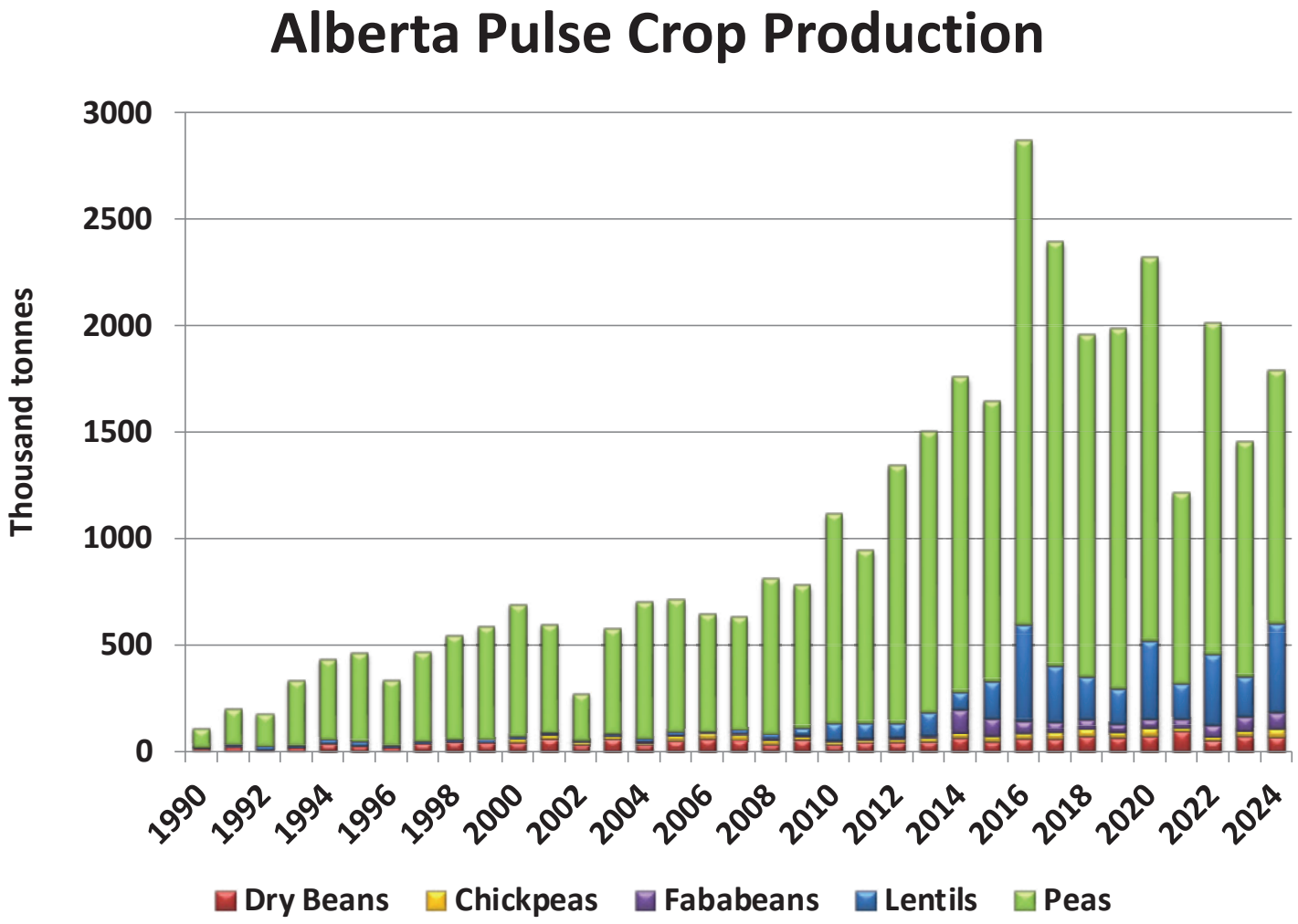
How times have changed! When I heard that APG was celebrating its 35th year as a commission, my first thought was that it started a very long time ago. But when I did the math, I realized 35 years ago was "only" 1990. And that was the year I began working full-time in the grain industry, making it a shared anniversary.

Over those 35 years, there have been huge changes in agriculture. While we most often think of the amazing advances in technology, there have also been large changes in the type of crops produced. Because those shifts in acreage happened gradually, they may not be as noticeable. Maybe the best way to get a sense of how much cropping has changed over the last 35 years is to compare acreage mixes in 1990 and 2024.

One thing that's remained steady over the years is that non-durum wheat still makes up just under a third of Alberta acreage. At the same time, canola acreage in the province has expanded to nearly the same size as wheat while seeded area of barley and oats has declined. The most noticeable change is summerfallow, which was the third largest "crop" in 1990 but has now almost disappeared.

Acreage of pulse crops has grown considerably between 1990 and 2024, going from less than one half of one percent of cropland to more than nine percent this past year. Stated another way, fewer than 100,000 acres of pulses (mostly peas and dry beans) were planted in 1990, compared to nearly two million acres in 2024. Gains since 1990 have been impressive for all types of pulses, with pea acreage up nearly 1,400%, seeded area of lentils up an eye-popping 11,000%, faba beans expanding by over 500% and dry bean acreage up 140% (no chickpea acres were reported until 2000).

The detailed acreage information reveals a few other shifts in Western Canadian pulse acreage. In the 1990s, the makeup of green and yellow pea acreage was roughly 40/60. Over time, green pea acreage remained steady or even declined slightly while all of the growth in acreage occurred in



Source: Stats Canada, LeftField

yellow peas. For lentils, the shift was even greater. Green lentils made up the large majority of acreage in the 1990s and even as late as 2013, accounted for half of the seeded area. Both green and red lentil acreage has expanded over the years, but red lentils accounted for most of the growth.

Pulse production in Alberta has also seen a huge expansion, going from 110,000 tonnes in 1990 to 1.79 mln tonnes in 2024, a 16-fold increase. While growth has occurred throughout the last 35 years, the largest gains were seen from 2010 to 2016, when production nearly tripled. Since that spike in 2016, the focus has been on finding the right mix of acreage that is sustainable from an agronomic perspective.

Canadian pulses have always depended heavily on export markets, and those have seen some large shifts as well. For example, in the ’90s, Europe was the largest destination for Canadian pea exports, with Asia in second place. Since then though, most of the growth in Canadian pea production has been fueled by exports to China, India and other Asian destinations, which now dominate the market.

Likewise in the 1990s, when most Canadian lentils were green varieties, Europe was the largest destination for Canadian exports with Asia only a minor market. But as red lentil production expanded, Asia and the Middle East became much more important export destinations.

For Alberta pulses and APG, there are many opportunities and challenges ahead. Depending on exports has allowed the amazing expansion of the industry, but it also has its risks. This means market development efforts are more important than ever, not only to expand and diversify pulse exports but also to encourage more opportunities in domestic processing and consumption. The remarkable changes that have occurred over the past 35 years didn’t happen by chance, but rather through the collective efforts of farsighted individuals. It will be exciting to see what happens in the years ahead.

Chuck Penner’s favourite pulse recipe is sprouted lentil salad.