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Illinois farmers expect to plant less corn, more soybeans

By Jim Suhr

Associated Press

ST. LOUIS - Illinois corn growers expect to plant 700,000 fewer acres this year - the largest acreage decrease of any of the nation's top corn-producing states as farmers apparently shift toward more soybeans, the Agriculture Department said Friday.

Compensating for the expected shrinkage in Illinois corn acreage from its record seedings a year ago, farmers statewide estimate they will plant 600,000 more acres of soybeans than last year, according to the department's National Agricultural Statistics Service.

Darrel Good, a University of Illinois crop market analyst, said various factors might explain a shift toward soybeans, including increases in nitrogen fertilizer costs and fuel - offshoots of high energy prices - that has helped make corn less competitive than soybeans, at least for now.

In Illinois, "this may be a one-year aberration," he said. "Everybody is pretty optimistic about the potential growth and demand for corn. If it grows as expected, driven by ethanol, we're going to have to see pretty significant growth in acres to keep up with demand."

At least for now, southern Illinois' Richard Borgsmiller intends to stay the course with his largely rented acreage near Murphysboro, where he's planning to plant 325 to 350 acres of corn - he seeded about 300 last year - and about 400 of soybeans, up about 50 acres from 2005.

Borgsmiller, 62, downplayed Friday's report, believing the acreage estimates - based largely on surveys conducted during the first two weeks of March - already might be outdated.

"One thing you've got to remember is that some of these numbers from the USDA are from a survey done 30 days ago. A lot can change in 30 days," he said. "The cost and the income are all moving targets."

Illinois corn acreage is expected to slip to 11.4 million, down 6 percent from the 12.1 million acres planted last year. Corn farmers in Illinois and the nine other key corn-producing states intend to plant 62.3 million acres, down 4 percent from the 65.1 million acres planted last year.

Soybean plantings across Illinois are expected to cover 10.1 million acres, up 6 percent from the 9.5 million acres planted last year, the yearly report found.

Over the past 10 years, Illinois corn planting "has generally been on either side of 11 million acres," going as low as 10.6 million to as high as 12.1 million, the Illinois Farm Bureau's John Hawkins said. Soybean seedings statewide consistently have been around 10 million acres from 1997 to 2004, with a 10-year high of 10.7 million acres in 2001, Hawkins said.

Nationwide, corn growers look to plant 78 million acres of corn this year, down 5 percent from 2005 and the lowest acreage since 75.7 million acres were planted in 2001. Officials also attribute that dropoff in most states to high fertilizer and fuel costs that have some producers switching to crops that are cheaper to grow.

U.S. soybean producers expect to plant 76.9 million acres - up 7 percent from last year, making this year's acreage the largest on record.

With normal weather and yields, the Illinois Farm Bureau said, the plantings could result in a corn crop of 10.5 billion bushels, the third largest on record, and a soybean crop of 3.09 billion bushels, the second largest.

Growers in 20 of the 31 soybean-producing states intend to plant more acres this year. Illinois and the 10 other major soybean-growing states, generally in the Midwest, expect to plant 63.1 million acres, up 7 percent from last year.

The acreage estimates in Friday's report are based on surveys of more than 87,000 farm operators across the country.

ON THE NET

Prospective Plantings Report:

<http://www.usda.gov/nass/PUBS/TODAYRPT/pspl0306.txt>