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CC182 Are You Considering Castrobeans for 1961?

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ARE YOU CONSIDERING CASTORBEANS YET?

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In 1961 Nebraska will have a castorbean acreage several times as large as the 1,000 acres which were harvested in 1960. Many farmers have not yet decided whether to sign a contract to grow castorbeans or not. Waiting to see what a new farm program would involve has been wise. In this period of the cost-price squeeze they must give careful consideration to their choice of crops and their cultural practices. Insofar as possible, they must choose the kinds of crop and livestock enterprises that will be most profitable in their own farm situation. Both immediate returns and possible long range potential suggest that farmers in south central Nebraska may wish to consider planting an acreage to castorbeans.

Expected Returns Compared With Corn

What kind of costs and returns can a farmer expect from raising castorbeans? Let's confine the discussion to irrigation farmers in south central Nebraska because this is the group primarily involved in such a decision. The average yield of corn under irrigation in these counties has been about 80 bushels per acre. By comparing the cultural operations involved, costs of producing castorbeans will be similar, perhaps a little higher, than for corn. The labor requirements and time schedule will also be similar if timely mechanical weed control practices are effective and hand hoeing can be avoided.

Let us assume that the costs of producing castorbeans and corn are similar up to harvest time and that corn can be harvested for about $5.00 an acre and that it will cost 3/4¢ per pound to harvest castorbeans. We can calculate that it would have taken about 1680 pounds of castorbeans per acre to return the same amount as 80-bushel corn if corn is figured at $1.01 per bushel, the 1960 support price in Adams County, and castorbeans at the 1961 contract price of 5.24 cents per pound delivered at Hastings.

What are the chances of farmers raising 1680 pounds of castorbeans per acre in 1961? With good production practices this yield should not be difficult to achieve. Actually, the growers in 1960, who had never raised castorbeans before, averaged almost 1400 pounds per acre under irrigation. Raising this average by 300 pounds per acre is definitely possible by improving the timing and effectiveness of field operations. The eight irrigated fields in Furnas County in 1960 averaged 1862 pounds per acre and gave an average gross return of $97.30 to the farmer. Five growers in 1960 averaged more than 2,000 pounds per acre. Performance tests over quite a period of years indicate that yields at this level are definitely possible if appropriate cultural practices are used.

EXTENSION SERVICE
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE
AND U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
COOPERATING
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Factors to Consider

Here are some of the factors to consider about castorbeans:

(1) Nebraska is on the northern edge of the area of adaptation of this crop. Our experience to date indicates that castorbeans probably should not be grown north of the Platte Valley, nor farther west in the Platte Valley than the vicinity of Lexington, nor north of a line from there southwest to McCook.

(2) In the central Nebraska area, success is much more likely under irrigation than on dryland. Our experience on dryland in this area has been quite limited. Dryland production will be quite closely related to the amount of rainfall and the type of season which occurs.

(3) The only agency presently contracting for castorbeans in Nebraska is the South Central Nebraska Agricultural and Industrial Corporation at Hastings. A farmer who signs a contract is guaranteed a definite market and price for the castorbeans he produces. Other companies may be interested in contracting in the future if production is successful enough to indicate a stable supply.

(4) Good yields can be expected only if good cultural practices are followed. The principal problems to be met are getting good stands, controlling weeds, providing adequate fertility, irrigating sufficiently, and getting the crop harvested.

(5) No serious disease or insect problems occurred in 1960. They could possibly develop, but there is no way to predict whether they will or not.

Harvesting

Harvesting castorbeans requires a special harvesting attachment and other modifications on a combine. The attachment and modifications are rather expensive and probably will prompt most farmers to have harvesting done on a custom basis. Since a single combine can probably handle from 300 to 400 acres in the harvest season, a custom operator will want to be sure that he can have a full season's work before investing. Many people apparently are willing to make this investment if they have assurance that there will be acreage to harvest. Representatives of the Corporation and the State Department of Agriculture are assisting growers in making harvest arrangements. Bankers and others are aiding in these arrangements. It appears that an adequate number of custom operators will be interested. They will have time to line up equipment after the contracts are signed. Harvesting, therefore, is not expected to be a problem in 1961.

Precautions in Handling

Castorbeans contain a poison. Actually the amount of poison in the green plants is very small and probably will never cause any trouble. Most of the poison is in the seed itself. Consequently, seeds should never be eaten nor should they be allowed to become mixed with feed grains. Particular care must be taken at all times to avoid getting castorbeans mixed with any other grain. If handlers are careful, and if farmers make sure volunteer plants in other crops are killed before they set seed, there is no need for problems to develop. Young castorbeans are very susceptible to 2,4-D and atrazine, so control should be easy.
At many stores, castorbeans are sold along with garden and flower seeds to be planted as ornamentals. Many will be seen around towns and farmsteads where they have been planted in the flower beds for ornamental purposes. Certainly the risk of poisoning people is much greater in these indiscriminate plantings than from commercial plantings by farmers.

Livestock apparently will eat neither the plant nor the seed unless forced to do so. Consequently, danger to livestock is small. Nevertheless, care should be exercised at all times to avoid any possibility of illness or loss from carelessness in growing or handling the crop.

Where to Get Information

Farmers raising castorbeans for the first time in 1961 can get reliable information on production practices from their county Extension agents, representatives of the South Central Nebraska Corporation, other specialists from the College of Agriculture, or representatives of the State Department of Agriculture. Much can be learned about the principal production problems from the experiences of farmers who raised castorbeans in 1960.

The county Extension agents in south central Nebraska followed the crop last year very closely and are in an excellent position to answer most questions about producing the crop. Their knowledge about it is a real asset as we undertake the production of a larger acreage in 1961. The Corporation has contracts with the farmer on the one hand and with the Baker Castor Oil Company on the other. Since the purpose of the Corporation is to help boost farm incomes and local industry in the south central area of Nebraska, its representatives will provide as much production information as they can. The purpose of the State Department of Agriculture is to promote the agricultural interests of the state.

Castorbeans are a new crop. Most farmers in 1961 will be growing them for the first time. They should learn as much as they can about the problems of raising this crop before undertaking the venture. It is to be emphasized again, however, that the county Extension agents and others are in a position to answer most questions about production. The Extension Service expects to provide regular newsletters advising on production practices and factors that need attention as the season progresses. This should be tangible and reassuring assistance to new growers. Plans of the Corporation and the Department of Agriculture call for maintaining fieldmen to advise on growing the crop and to assist with any special problems that may arise.

Making the Decision

The long-range development of castorbeans as a crop in Nebraska will depend on the long-range economic picture for this crop relative to others. If Nebraska farmers are able to produce good yields of castorbeans and if the market price does not drop below where it is now, castorbeans may well become established as a crop in Nebraska. If experience is sufficiently profitable, the acreage might soon expand to the extent that a processing plant could be established in the state. If the net effect of a plant were to reduce transportation costs, this might provide farmers some increase in price for their crop as well as creating industrial employment opportunities.

Farmers who use good practices in growing castorbeans have a good chance of making a profit. The need for industrial development in the state is a factor to be considered from a long-range point of view. Each farmer should very candidly appraise the problems associated with castorbean production before he decides to grow them. He should consider his profit potential and personal interests next year and in the long run. If his decision is to plant castorbeans, he should fully utilize the sources of information available to him to assure as successful an operation as possible.