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Farmers Planting More Biotech Crops This Year Despite International Resistance

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WASHINGTON (AP) - American farmers will plant more genetically engineered crops this year, including one-third of the corn on U.S. soil, shrugging off international resistance to biotech food.

The farmers are expected to grow more than 79 million acres of genetically engineered corn and soybeans, the nation's two most widely planted commodities, a 13 percent increase from last year, according to the Agriculture Department's spring survey.

In North Dakota, the government says farmers expect to plant a record 2.6 million acres of soybeans, up 21 percent from last year. Fifty-percent of this year's crop is expected to be planted to biotech varieties, up from 49 percent last year.

The gene-altered crops require fewer chemicals, making them easier and cheaper to grow. The crops are engineered to produce their own pesticide or to be resistant to a popular weedkiller.

"Farming has become so competitive, so small margin, that if we can find something that works economically and environmentally we'll jump on it," said Minnesota farmer Gerald Tumbleson, who grows biotech corn and soybeans.

About 74 percent of this year's national soy crop, or 54 million acres, will be genetically engineered, compared with 68 percent last year and 54 percent in 2000, the department said Thursday. Soy is a critical ingredient for a wide variety of foods and, like corn, also is used for animal feed.

Some 32 percent of the corn crop, or 25.3 million acres, will be of biotech varieties, compared with 26 percent in 2001 and 25 percent the year before.

Strong consumer resistance to agricultural biotechnology has arisen in Europe and Japan, but most U.S.-grown corn and soy is used domestically.

"The farmer looks at it strictly from profitability," said commodities analyst Don Roose. "They're not shying away from it."

About 10.5 million acres of cotton, or 71 percent of this year's cotton crop, will be bioengineered. Last year, 69 percent of the cotton was gene-altered.

The biotech soybeans contain a bacterium gene that makes them immune to Roundup herbicide. In some cases, farmers can get by with treating their fields just once a year to keep away yield-robbing weeds. Fields seeded with conventionally bred varieties can require many sprayings with different types of chemicals.

In Nebraska, South Dakota, Kansas and Indiana, 80 percent or more of the soybean crop is expected to be biotech.

The popular varieties of biotech cotton are either Roundup-immune or else produce their own pesticide. Most of the genetically engineered corn that farmers plant was designed to kill a common insect pest, the

European corn borer.

The crops were first commercialized in the mid- to late 1990s, and the Agriculture Department has surveyed their use nationally since 2000.

The biotechnology industry was set back in 1999 by research raising fears, since alleviated, that the biotech corn was killing off Monarch butterflies. The following year, the industry was embarrassed when a type of gene-altered corn was found in the food supply without being approved for human consumption.

Thursday's report "shows the continued high confidence that U.S. farmers have placed in seeds improved through biotechnology," said Michael Phillips of the Biotechnology Industry Organization."

Other biotech crops, such as potatoes and tomatoes, have met resistance from farmers and the food industry, and wheat growers are nervous about the pending introduction of Roundup-resistant wheat. Wheat is far more dependent on export markets than other crops.

"That is a huge factor, the extent to which a crop is going to be exported," said Jane Rissler, a biotech critic with the Union of Concerned Scientists.

The Agriculture Department survey also predicts that farmers will increase their total plantings of corn this year, while cutting back on soybeans, wheat and cotton.

The total corn crop is expected to reach 79 million acres, a 4 percent increase from 2001, while plantings of soybeans are expected to drop 2 percent to 73 million acres. Farmers gave a variety of reasons for planting less soy, including uncertainty about how the government will subsidize the commodity after lawmakers finish an overhaul of farm programs.

The wheat crop this year is expected to total 59 million acres, down 1 percent from last year and the lowest level in 30 years.

The cotton crop is estimated at 14.8 million acres this year, 6 percent below last year.