Higher Sugar Prices Partially Revive Dying Ravalli Sugar Beet Industry

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HAMILTON — The sugar beet industry in Ravalli County has apparently leveled off slightly after nearly a decade of decline, according to farmers and sugar refinery officials, but the long-range prospect for the industry is not good.

Harvesting began last week and is expected to continue through the rest of October. Great Western Sugar Co. loading depots at Corvallis and Victor will be working 10 hours a day, six days a week during that time.

The Crystal Sugar Co. refinery in Missoula was purchased by Great Western, which moved the operation to Billings after 1965. Up until that time Ravalli County farmers had over 3,000 acres in sugar beets, according to Corvallis grower Raymond Tintzman.

Since that time the acreage has declined to about 400 at the present, with only six Ravalli County growers under contract.

The Great Western Company has 20,000 acres under contract in the state, Tintzman said, and Ravalli County is now one of its smallest stations.

Tintzman said that the harvest appears to be running 18-19 tons an acre, about two tons short of last year. Prices look to be up some, though, he said.

Although the sugar beet price situation is better for farmers these days, increased freight rates and the cost of equipment tend to discourage expansion of present operations or former growers coming back into the business. Much of the sophisticated machinery used in sugar beet growing today was not in use 10 years ago.

According to County Extension Agent Rob Johnson, the long term prospect for sugar beet production in Ravalli County is not good because of increased competition for other land uses such as home sites and horse pasture; high machinery prices; the high level of management skill required for intense sugar beet production, and increased freight rates.

"There may be a 100-acre increase in sugar beet fields next year," Johnson said, "but when the present growers are ready to retire, that will probably be the end of sugar beet production in Ravalli County."

THE BEETS ARE IN — Overseeing the loading of Ravalli County's shrinking sugar beet harvest is Harold Smith, Victor. Officials say only about 400 acres in the county are now dedicated to production of sugar beets. (Chris Johnson Photo)