

## Commodity Highlight: Sweet Potatoes

Sweet potatoes are the seventh most important food crop in the world. A trailing vine producing a crop of fleshy roots, sweet potatoes are native to South America and are part of the morning glory (*Convolvulaceae*) family. Many in the U.S. refer to sweet potatoes as yams although few true yams are grown in the United States. Sweet potatoes (*Ipomoea batatas*) are also not related to white (Irish) potatoes. In relation to the world, the United States is the tenth largest producer, with China (PRC) accounting for 85 percent of the world's crop.

Over the 1999-2001 period, U.S. sweet potato growers produced an average of 13.5 million cwt from 90,500 harvested acres. Farm cash receipts from the sale of sweet potatoes averaged \$214 million during this time. According to the 1997 Census of Agriculture, sweet potatoes are grown on 1,770 farms—down 34 percent from 1992 and 44 percent below the number in 1987.

Except for California, the U.S. sweet potato industry is largely concentrated among the southeastern States. North Carolina (37 percent of the crop), Louisiana (24 percent), and California (18 percent) are the top three producing States and accounted for about 79 percent of the U.S. crop during 1999-2001. Mississippi (13 percent) and Alabama (3 percent) round out the top 5 States.

The long-term downward spiral in production that began after the depression in the 1930s has been reversed. Since reaching a trough in 1988, U.S. sweet potato production has trended higher, rising 15 percent between 1989-1991 and 1999-2001. In fact, production in 2001 was the third highest since 1965 (peak production was 48 million cwt in 1932).

Export sales totaled \$14 million in 2001, while imports were valued at \$4 million. About 1 percent of sweet potato consumption is satisfied through imports.

However, few imports enter the continental United States, with most volume (97 percent in 2001) moving directly from the Dominican Republic into Puerto Rico. Between 1999-2001 and 1989-91, fresh/frozen sweet potato export volume has nearly tripled to 43 million pounds. More than 3 percent of supply is now exported—up from 1 percent a decade earlier. The major market for U.S. sweet potatoes remains Canada but substantial increases have been realized in the United Kingdom.

During 1999-2001, U.S. consumption of sweet potatoes averaged an estimated 1.2 billion pounds. On a per capita basis, this works out to 4.1 pounds—unchanged from 1989-1991 but down from 4.7 pounds in 1979-1981. During 2001, fresh-market use was estimated to be 2.9 pounds per person, with the remaining 1.4 pounds sold as processed products (largely for canning).

As defined by the Census, the South is the largest region with 35 percent of the Nation's population. The South accounts for 42 percent of fresh market sweet potato consumption and 54 percent of processed consumption. Per capita use of all sweet potatoes in the South was estimated to be 5.7 pounds in 2001 followed by the Midwest (4.3 pounds), and the Northeast (3.9 pounds). Those in the West eat the fewest sweet potatoes (2.6 pounds).

Men 60 years of age and older account for 7 percent of the population but consume 16 percent of all sweet potatoes—the equivalent of 10.5 pounds per person in 2001 and the highest among all age groups. Women in this age group were the second largest group of consumers, with the equivalent of 7.1 pounds per person. This suggests that a taste for sweet potatoes may be acquired with maturity.

Table 12--U.S. sweet potatoes: Supply, utilization, and trade share, farm weight

Year	Supply			Utilization			Season-ave price		
	Production 1/	Imports 2/	Total	Exports 2/	Feed, seed shrink 3/	Domestic	Per capita use	Current dollars 1/	Constant 1996 dollars 4/
	-- Million pounds --						Pounds	-- \$/cwt --	
1970	1,316.0	0.0	1,316.0	0.0	206.1	1,109.9	5.4	4.38	14.95
1980	1,095.3	2.5	1,097.8	17.4	81.5	998.9	4.4	13.60	23.70
1990	1,259.4	19.1	1,278.5	14.7	163.4	1,100.4	4.4	9.70	11.21
1999	1,223.4	17.7	1,241.1	40.7	160.7	1,039.7	3.7	17.60	16.82
2000	1,379.4	15.0	1,394.4	39.1	173.0	1,182.3	4.2	15.30	14.29
2001	1,456.5	13.6	1,470.1	47.7	176.7	1,245.7	4.3	15.40	14.08
2002 f	1,395.0	14.0	1,409.0	50.0	170.0	1,189.0	4.1	--	--
2003 f	1,435.0	14.5	1,449.5	52.0	172.5	1,225.0	4.2	--	--

f = ERS forecast. 1/ Source: National Agricultural Statistics Service, USDA. 2/ Source is Bureau of the Census, U.S. Dept. of Commerce.

3/ Includes estimates of feed and seed use and shrinkage and loss. Also includes net change in canned stocks for 1970 and 1980.

4/ Deflated by the GDP implicit price deflator, 1996=100.