

# Potato museum overhauls exhibits

By JOHN O'CONNELL  
Capital Press

BLACKFOOT, Idaho — Idaho Potato Museum staff have begun planning its first exhibits overhaul in years, envisioning a small movie theater, interactive touch-screen technology and new content appealing to a broader audience.

A Blackfoot construction contractor, K2 Building, has also gutted a small, vacant restaurant attached to the museum to start work on an eatery specializing in potatoes.

A train caboose parked on the museum property will be converted into supplemental, outdoor bathrooms, meeting a need for visitors who come on tour buses, and the adjacent park will be made into a children's play area called Potato Land, featuring toy farm equipment.

The museum, which operates on visitor admissions and gift shop sales, has budgeted \$40,000 toward the restaurant and \$110,000 toward the renovation, with help from outside grants. Both projects should be completed by spring.

Tish Damen, executive director of the Blackfoot Chamber of Commerce and director of the museum, said the eatery will serve baked potatoes, potato soup and fries. She's in the process of ordering restau-



John O'Connell/Capital Press

Tish Damen, executive director of the Idaho Potato Museum in Blackfoot, Idaho, stands by the giant potato near her facility's entrance. Damen has commenced work on a new museum restaurant, featuring potatoes, and has plans to update all of the exhibits and build a children's play land in the park outside, featuring toy farm equipment.

rant equipment and has an application pending with the Southeastern District Health Department.

"The No. 1 request we have from visitors is, 'Well now we're hungry. We want to eat a potato,'" Damen said.

Lynn Leasure, a Southern Utah consultant hired to oversee the exhibits renovation, said touch-screen vid-

eos, images and content will be displayed throughout the museum. One exhibit, for example, will include video of former Vice President Dan Quayle's infamous gaff, when he instructed a child to add the letter "e" to the end of the word potato during a spelling bee. The exhibit will include a Quayle-auto-graphed spud.

Leasure said the theater

will house about 10 seats.

The Idaho Potato Commission has supplied the museum with videos and old promotional materials, including from a promotion depicting IPC marketing staff as super heroes and footage of IPC's Great Big Idaho Potato Truck tours. Local manufacturers have also supplied videos and photographs.

"I've picked out probably

# Strong El Niño could fizzle quickly

By TIM HEARDEN  
Capital Press

SACRAMENTO — Forecasters still expect historically strong El Niño conditions to usher in a parade of storm clouds this winter, but the phenomenon may fizzle by springtime.

The federal Climate Prediction Center still expects that this winter's El Niño could rank among the three strongest since 1950 and that the typical pattern of southern storms will materialize, officials said on Nov. 12.

Warming sea-surface temperatures in the equatorial Pacific Ocean nearly match those in the fall of 1997 and exceed those in 1972 and 1982, all big rainfall years, the center notes.

But after peaking this winter, the El Niño pattern may recede quickly, returning to the neutral sea-surface and atmospheric conditions that have prevailed through much of California's four-year drought.

"There is an approximately 95 percent chance that El Niño will continue through Northern Hemisphere 2015-16, gradually weakening through spring 2016," the CPC concluded in a written update.

Water experts have said California would need more than one wet and snowy winter to emerge from its historic drought.

The last El Niño in California in the winter of 2009-2010 interrupted a three-year drought. But before this year's recurrence, sea surface temperatures across the equatorial Pacific have mostly been near average since spring of 2012, meaning neither El Niño or La Niña influenced weather patterns. During much of that time, a strong ridge of high pressure off California's coast blocked storms from entering, causing the current drought.

The latest outlook comes as rain- and snow-producing systems have been passing through California every few days, and that pattern is expected to continue through November. However, the storms have so far been brought by a polar jet stream pushing cold systems down from the north, said Michelle Mead, a National Weather Service warning coordinator in Sacramento.

"Therefore, the recent storms are not associated with El Niño," Mead said in an email. "Rather, this is a more 'typical' Northern California weather pattern for this time of year. It's just that we haven't seen a typical fall/winter season over the past four years, so these systems seem more unusual to folks."

El Niño storms tend to be warmer with higher snow levels, so when the sub-tropical jet stream storm track kicks in, the potential for warmer storms will increase, she said.

Even so, many areas in Central California are off to a fast start in terms of rainfall, exceeding their normal seasonal totals, while many northern areas are still lagging behind their normal precipitation levels for this time of year, according to the National Weather Service.

For instance, Salinas had recorded 2.21 inches of rainfall for the water year as of Nov. 12, well above its average of 1.03 inches, while the 2.35 inches that had fallen on Eureka as of Nov. 12 was well below its seasonal average of 4.11 inches, according to the weather service. The water year begins Oct. 1.

El Niño's storm track may take hold by the first week of December, when California's Central Valley could see thunderstorms with afternoon temperatures in the mid-60s, according to AccuWeather's long-range forecast.

# EEOC owes \$1 million for 'baseless' lawsuit against farms

Federal judge found the labor agency's investigation was deficient

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI  
Capital Press

A federal judge has ordered the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to pay nearly \$1 million in attorney fees incurred by two Washington farms accused of "baseless" labor law violations.

Valley Fruit Orchards and Green Acre Farms, both of Yakima County, were named as civil defendants as part of a broader litigation strategy launched by EEOC, which accused Global Horizons, a labor contractor, and several farms of breaching federal laws.

The EEOC claimed that Global Horizons engaged in criminal human trafficking of Thai crop harvesters by exploiting the H-2A guest worker program while farms in Washington and Hawaii ignored or participated in the abuses.

Criminal charges against Global Horizons and its managers were dropped in 2012 after federal prosecutors admitted "the government is unable to prove the elements of the

charged offenses beyond a reasonable doubt."

Several of the farms in Hawaii settled the civil charges, while Global Horizons and a co-defendant, Maui Pineapple, were ordered by a judge to pay \$8.7 million in civil penalties last year for discriminatory conduct, retaliation and other abuses of Thai workers.

In the civil case against Valley Fruit Orchards and Green Acre Farms, the EEOC initially demanded they pay more than \$30 million to avoid a lawsuit and then filed a complaint against the farms in 2011 when settlement talks faltered.

In 2014, a federal judge found that the EEOC did not present enough evidence to show the two farms created a hostile work environment, took adverse employment actions on the basis of national origin or retaliated against workers.

Earlier this year, Senior U.S. District Judge Edward Shea ruled that the EEOC "failed to conduct an adequate investigation before filing the lawsuit against the grower defendants," finding the claims against them were "baseless, unreasonable and frivolous."

The Thai workers were employed at various locations over time and didn't speak English

proficiently, but these problems do not excuse the EEOC from thoroughly investigating the claims of labor law violations, Shea said.

For example, the number of workers allegedly affected by discrimination varied widely during the EEOC's investigation even though the agency could have discerned this information from invoices from Global Horizons, he said. "This unpreparedness is highlighted by the ever-changing number of Thai claimants throughout this lawsuit."

None of the farms' owners, managers or supervisors were interviewed by EEOC prior to the lawsuit and the agency did not identify which farm employed the workers at the time they were allegedly discriminated against, he said.

The EEOC also failed to establish that the farms were jointly liable for alleged discrimination committed by Global Horizons, Shea said.

Due to these and other defects, the judge decided that this was an "exceptional case" where the farms were entitled to their attorney fees.

After further litigation over the exact amount, Shea recently calculated that EEOC owed the farms \$986,000 based on the work of several law firms.

# Idaho governor pledges support for rangeland fire associations

By SEAN ELLIS  
Capital Press

BOISE — Idaho Gov. Butch Otter praised ranchers and farmers who are members of six rangeland fire protection associations and pledged to continue to support their efforts.

"These (RFPAs) have probably been the best fire-fighting tool we've created since the pulaski," Otter said, referring to a handtool used in wildfire fighting, during the Idaho Rangeland Fire Protection Associations' annual meeting Nov. 10. "I fully ... expect we will continue to fund those through the state legislature."

Since Mountain Home ranchers created the state's first RFPA in 2012, five other associations have formed in southcentral and southwestern Idaho, an area that has had more repeat fires in the past four decades than any other region in the country.

About 230 RFPA members have been trained by the Bureau of Land Management and are qualified to help federal and state officials fight wildfires. Most of them are ranchers, with some farmers, and about 50 more people will be trained this winter.

The six RFPAs have helped the BLM and state fight 83 wildfires since 2013 and other states are now emulating their efforts, said Idaho Department of Lands State Forester David Groeschl.

"Kudos to you. That's amazing," he said. "We will do everything we can do ... to support this effort."

Tim Murphy, BLM's Idaho director, praised the members for volunteering their own time and money to help protect the resources in their region.

RFPA members provide a lot of their own firefighting equipment, including water trucks, dozers and living.

"You're not just living there, you're taking action," he said. "I want to offer my continued support for the program."

At Otter's request, the Idaho Legislature has provided \$455,000 since fiscal year 2014 to help create the RFPAs and help members purchase personal protective gear, radios and other basic equipment.

a dozen of our more popular (videos) and sent them over to them," said IPC industry relations director Travis Blacker.

One IPC video features actress Dawn Wells, who played Mary Ann on Gilligan's Island, demonstrating the proper way to peel a potato.

Blacker said the museum is a popular stop for IPC tour groups.

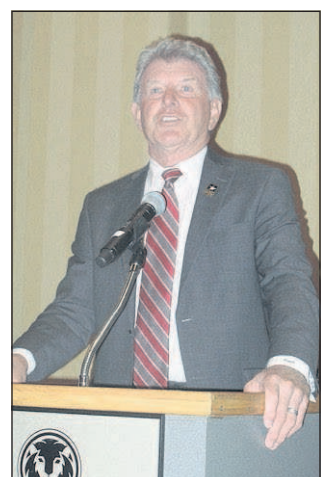
"Their plan is to draw more and more people in there to see what Idaho is all about and how important the overall potato industry is in Idaho," Blacker said.

Museum visitation has spiked this year, reaching 14,500 people, up from 8,800, due largely to increased Yellowstone National Park traffic, Dahmen said.

Leasure has also suggested converting an old furnace room into a mock potato cellar, which would include interactive displays featuring museum mascots Bud the Spud, Potato Patty and Tater Tot. Another point of emphasis will be adding more information on industry pioneers, such as Simplot, Co. founder J.R. Simplot, who reached a handshake agreement with McDonald's founder Ray Kroc to supply the restaurant chain with french fries.

New content, such as potato poems and songs, will also target children, Leasure said.

Sean Ellis/Capital Press



Sean Ellis/Capital Press

Idaho Gov. Butch Otter addresses ranchers and farmers during the Idaho Rangeland Fire Protection Associations' annual meeting Nov. 10. Six RFPAs formed by ranchers and growers have helped state and federal officials fight 83 wildfires since 2013.

There will be at least one and maybe two new RFPAs in place for the 2016 fire season, said Julia Sullens, the IDL's liaison to the groups.

The Notch Butte RFPA, which will cover an area north of Twin Falls, will definitely be ready, Sullens said, and the Clark County RFPA north of Idaho Falls in East Idaho is trying to meet a Dec. 31 deadline to be ready.

Ranchers in two other areas are in the process of forming their own fire protection associations: The Prairie RFPA north of Mountain Home and Weiser Area RFPA.

RFPA members and federal and state officials talked openly during the Nov. 10 meeting about logistical issues that need to be addressed.

The chief concerns were improving communications, equipment and water assets, as well as roads.

"We need to work on roads to get better access to some of these areas," said Saylor Creek RFPA Chairman Mike Faulkner.

Because of their training level, RFPA members are only allowed to assist the BLM on initial attack of a wildfire and ranchers said they would like to be utilized in a greater role in some cases.

"I'd like to see RFPAs play a larger role in fighting wildfires," said Mountain Home RFPA Chairman Charlie Lyons.

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