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Farmer soars as TV's potato pilot

By JOHN O'CONNELL Capital Press

IDAHO FALLS, Idaho James Hoff is a fourth-generation farmer, a third-generation pilot and a first-generation TV

Both of his passions — agriculture and aviation — are featured prominently in the nationally televised commercial that's made Hoff and his vintage biplane nearly as big as the Idaho Potato Commission's Great Big Idaho Potato

The first two IPC commercials in the series feature Caldwell grower Mark Coombs searching for the commission's giant replica potato on a flatbed truck, which has toured the country for the past three years raising awareness about Idaho spuds. In the third commercial segment, which debuted during this season's inaugural Boise State football game, Hoff — playing the role of an "actual Idaho potato farmer" — helps Coombs search for the missing truck from the sky in a 1943 Boeing Stearman bi-

"It's been at least five air shows that have contacted us asking us if the plane can make an appearance," said IPC President and CEO Frank Muir, who's received inquiries from other Stearman owners hoping to join Hoff in the next commercial, or at least display their planes with him at an air show.

Hoff, of Idaho Falls, plans to accept at least one of the air show invitations.

"It's a neat privilege to be considered for something like that," Hoff said.

After its debut, the commercial returned to national cable TV in October and will continue running through the end of January. Muir said IPC invested roughly \$200,000 to produce it and \$3 million for the air time, but he's confident it's helped move potatoes.

Muir — an adrenaline junkie who filled in for Coombs as stuntman during the most gut-wrenching maneuvers of the shoot — hoped to arrange a biplane fly-over during the national anthem at the recent IPC-sponsored Famous Idaho Potato Bowl in Boise. Unable to get clearance for a civilian aircraft, the Air Force provided F-15s and skydivers, who parachuted into Bronco Stadium holding the game ball, the potato seal.

Following IPC's initial success with an aerial promotion, Muir insists he's not ruling out companies' suggestions about an Idaho potato blimp.

Hoff's family has been flying almost as long as its been farming.

grandfather, Mark,

Panel to pick new **WDFW** director

The Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission is scheduled to select a successor to department director Phil Anderson on Jan. 10 in Olympia.

Anderson, whose department manages the state's wolf recovery plan, announced in August he would retire at the

end of the year. The commission, a citizen panel appointed by the governor to oversee WDFW, interviewed eight candidates in December and selected four finalists for another round of interviews in January. The interviews are closed to the public. The department has not identified the finalists.

The commission will convene for a daylong meeting at 8:30 a.m. Jan. 9 at the Comfort Inn Hotel and Conference Center, 1620 74th Ave. SW, in Olympia.

The commission will reconvene 8 a.m. Jan. 10 and is scheduled to select a director

During the two-day meeting, the commission will discuss several fishing-related issues.

An agenda is posted at wdfw.wa.gov/commission.



James Hoff, of Idaho Falls, sits in the cockpit of a 1943 Boeing Stearman biplane that he restored himself. Hoff and his plane have been invited to several air shows since he appeared in an Idaho Potato Commission commercial as an "actual potato farmer" piloting the aircraft in search of the Great Big Idaho Potato Truck.

learned to fly in the 1930s and assisted the newly formed Civil Air Patrol in recruiting during World War II. The family built its first airstrip on the farm in the 1950s, enabling Mark to seed alfalfa from the

Hoff's father, Bob, founded the company AeroMark in 1984, fueling and servicing aircraft at the Idaho Falls Regional Airport.

Hoff and his family keep five small aircraft, including two Stearman biplanes, in the hanger on their farm, by a grass airstrip between farm fields. They routinely use the planes to survey their crops.

Bob finished restoring the first Stearman in 1996. Hoff started on his plane in 2000 with two boxes of parts from a decommissioned Navy plane that was used as a crop duster into the 1970s. The Stearman made of steel pipe, wood and fabric covering - was used as a military training aircraft in WWII, featuring separate open-air cockpits for the instructor and the student.

Fries shipped by air to save Japan market

By JOHN O'CONNELL Capital Press

Hamstrung by dock worker labor disputes at West Coast ports, Northwestern frozen fry manufacturers have shipped 1,000 tons of product to Japan by air, seeking to protect a critical market, according to the Washington State Potato Commission.

Matt Harris, the commission's director of governmental affairs, said the air deliveries were intended to bridge the gap while Japanese fry shipments were diverted to East Coast ports. Harris said another 1,600 tons of frozen fries have been shipped to Japan from the East Coast.

Harris said Northwestern fry plants have scaled back production as a result of the labor problems. He said the airborne fry shipments originated from the Pacific Northwest. He's uncertain which processor or processors manufactured the product. Fry processors contacted by Capital Press either didn't return calls or deferred

questions to the Washington **State Potato Commission.**

Due to a shortage of fries resulting from the labor dispute, Harris said, 3,100 Japanese McDonald's franchises restricted customers to buying only a single order of small fries throughout much of December.

"They were able to start bringing more product to their stores and returned to the larger fries," Harris said.

Oregon Potato Commission President and CEO Bill Brewer said it cost about \$1.50 per pound when he shipped by air samples of Oregon potatoes to a foreign market for evaluation. As costly as air freight is, Brewer acknowledges the importance of protecting the Japanese market, which buys the vast majority of its frozen fries from the Pacific Northwest.

"Once you lose a customer, it's very difficult to win them back," Brewer said. "The numbers I've heard are that our potato exports have been limited to 15-20 percent of normal. This port slowdown is costing our industry a fortune."

