



Don Jenkins/Capital Press

The Washington State Potato Commission's director of industry outreach, Matthew Blau, hands out a potato with the trimmings Feb. 10 in the Legislative Building in Olympia as Quincy grower Rex Calloway, center facing camera, and the commission's director of marketing and industry affairs, Ryan Holterhoff, stand by to heap on more. The industry help its annual Potato Day at the Capitol.

Wash. potato growers serve Capitol spuds

Annual day brings attention to industry

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

OLYMPIA — The Washington potato industry served up 110-calorie baked potatoes Tuesday. What recipients did after that was their business.

Salsa and broccoli were available. So were chili, butter, sour cream and cheese. "We love to please every taste," Washington State Potato Commission Executive Director Chris Voigt said. "The potato is versatile."

For every legislative session for the past 17 years, the commission has hosted Potato Day, serving free spuds and

toppings in the Capitol Rotunda. The 1,500 Russet Norkotahs were going fast.

Potatoes, however, aren't moving as fast from West Coast ports. The potato industry combines promotion with politicking and came to Olympia with taxes and transportation projects on its agenda. But the industry's most-pressing problem is the port slowdowns as the Pacific Maritime Association and International Longshore and Warehouse Union bargain and trade accusations.

Every potato Quincy grower Rex Calloway produces is processed into french fries. And every potato he grew in 2014 remains in cool storage on his farm. The potatoes will keep through the summer, but they had better be gone by next fall when the 2015 crop

is ready to harvest, he said. "I'm very, very concerned. We need to get this product moving," said Calloway, who helped top the potatoes.

Even when ports return to normal, processors will need time to take his potatoes and empty his storage bins, Calloway said. "It's not going to get cleaned up immediately."

Calloway said the potato industry will talk to state lawmakers about the problem. There may be little legislators can do directly, but they can join export-dependent businesses in urging the port slowdowns to end.

"We need some support. We need to get people talking," he said. "We need to come to a settlement."

Voigt said Washington has 250 potato growers and about 60 percent of what they grow

is exported and 90 percent is processed.

The potato industry supports renewing tax exemptions for food processors. The exemptions are due to expire June 30. Gov. Jay Inslee has proposed extending the tax breaks for 10 more years. Senate and House budget writers will have to agree to insert the exemptions in the 2015-17 budget.

The potato industry also has an interest in transportation improvements, such as improving the flow of traffic into the Seattle and Tacoma ports and over Snoqualmie Pass.

The potato industry also supports legislation increasing weight limits for new truck tires with higher sidewall strength ratings. Voigt said the measure will allow trucks to carry more potatoes.

State's first industrial hemp license goes to a Southern Oregon man

By ERIC MORTENSON
Capital Press



Edgar Winters

A man who was issued the first state permit to grow industrial hemp said he and a nonprofit group of growers and activists hope to plant a 25-acre field in Southwest Oregon this spring.

Edgar Winters, of Eagle Point, Ore., who describes himself as director of the Oregon Agriculture Food & Rural Consortium, acknowledged there are problems obtaining seeds for planting and other complications, but said he is optimistic. Winters also said warehousing and processing facilities will be ready to go when a crop is harvested in late summer.

"We are in position to do 40 tons a day at our processing mill," Winters said. "We've got our ducks in a row."

Getting seed to plant is one of the major hurdles. Importing it requires the approval of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, and the Oregon Department of Agriculture and Oregon State University are working with the DEA on that process. In addition, Winters said a major Canadian hemp company, Hemp Textiles International, has breeders' rights to its seed and will not allow Oregon growers to retain seed for planting. Meanwhile, the existing state statute requires hemp seed produced in Oregon to be replanted.

"We're at a standstill," Winters said.

He said hemp seeds might be available from Russia, Hungary, Australia or New Zealand.

"We have to import to get started," Winters said. "We don't want our farmers to sit around another year."

Winters' LinkedIn profile lists him as self-employed and the chief operations officer for Natural Good Medicines. It also lists him as a master gardener and involved in research and development services for industrial hemp. He said people often hear his name and mistake him for Texas rock and blues musician Edgar Winter.

Ron Pence, who oversees the industrial hemp growing program for the state agriculture department, said the seed issue is one of three tweaks the Legislature may want to make during the 2015 session.

As written, a 2009 state statute says hemp seed collected in an Oregon harvest can only be used to produce a new crop — not crushed for oil or other high-value products, for example, or used as livestock feed. Pence said the restriction appears to be an oversight.

Another issue is the requirement for a three-year growing and handling license and a three-year seed handling permit, each of which cost \$500 a year, or \$1,500 for the required three years.

"A person could easily invest \$3,000 in a license and permit before spinning a wheel to produce hemp," Pence said. The fees may be restructured to an annual basis, at \$500 each, so a person could try his or her hand at it for a year at less expense.

A provision that requires a minimum production area of 2.5 acres also may be reconsidered, Pence said.

The Oregon Legislature legalized hemp cultivation in 2009, but the law was never implemented because the U.S. Department of Justice classified hemp the same as marijuana. The federal classification remains, but the justice department has said it won't interfere in states that have legalized hemp production if they adopt a robust regulatory system. Industrial hemp was included in the November 2014 ballot measure that legalized recreational marijuana use, possession and cultivation.

Biotech critics claim GMO loophole will backfire

Limited USDA authority strengthens argument for more regulation, critics say

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

Critics say a loophole in federal regulations for genetically engineered crops will backfire against biotech companies.

Under current rules, USDA can only restrict biotech crops if they incorporate genes that pose a possible plant pest risk.

Many common genetically modified crops relied on a soil bacteria for gene transfer and thus were regulated until the agency determined they weren't a hazard to other plants.

Since 2011, though, USDA has allowed companies to freely cultivate biotech crops without any environmental analysis because they're not made with genes from plant pathogens.

Recent examples include varieties of glyphosate-resistant tall fescue, a non-bruising potato and a higher-density

pine tree.

These approvals of biotech crops are a "trickle that turned into stream" and undermine claims by large biotech developers that genetically modified organisms are robustly scrutinized by the federal government, said George Kimbrell, attorney for the Center for Food Safety, a group that wants stronger biotech regulations.

"They need the facade," Kimbrell said.

Most of the biotech crops allowed to sidestep USDA's environmental reviews were developed by universities and small start-up companies, not major agribusiness firms that already dominate the market for biotech seed.

Minimal USDA oversight of GMOs that pose no plant pest risk will create problems for the mainstream biotech industry, as it strengthens the

case for stronger regulations, said Frank Morton, an organic seed producer from Philomath, Ore., who sued the federal government over biotech sugar beets.

Trading partners may disregard USDA's conclusions that crops altered with "gene gun" technology don't fall under its biotech jurisdiction, he said.

Export complications created by unregulated biotech grass varieties could prompt calls for the Oregon Department of Agriculture to step in with state restrictions, he said.

Several such proposals will be considered by Oregon lawmakers during the current legislative session, said Ivan Maluski, policy director for Friends of Family Farmers, a group that supports stronger GMO regulations.

The legislature pre-empted local governments from setting GMO rules in 2013 with the idea that such regulations should be statewide rather than a county-by-county "patchwork," he said.

While Oregon lawmakers

have in the past been reticent to broach the GMO issue, advocates for stronger regulation can now hold their feet to the fire, Maluski said.

The Biotechnology Industry Organization believes that federal agencies adequately regulate biotech crops, including those produced with gene guns that aren't considered possible plant pests, said Clint Nesbitt, the group's director of regulatory affairs for food and agriculture.

Those that are resistant to herbicides, like certain turf grasses, would still need to be approved by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, he said.

"Current regulations cover all the risk of biotech," Nesbitt said, adding that non-GMO crops aren't subject to any regulatory scrutiny.

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