

Idaho spud packers emphasize organic

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

IDAHO FALLS, Idaho — Idaho fresh potato packers expect 2015 will be a big year for the growing organic spud category.

Officials with locally based Potandon Produce announced Feb. 24 their first produce line marketed under the Potandon Produce brand will feature 3-pound bags of organic russet, red and yellow potatoes.

Wada Farms, which has facilities in Idaho Falls and Pingree, has been sourcing organic spuds from other growing areas for several years but plans to start producing its own Idaho-grown organic potatoes this season.

Idaho Falls-based Eagle Eye



Photo submitted

Potandon Produce, based in Idaho Falls, Idaho, has launched a new line of organic potatoes, to be marketed under the new Potandon Produce label.

Produce anticipates having its largest organic crop this season.

Ralph Schwartz, Potandon's vice president of marketing, sales and innovation, said the organic sector has enjoyed dou-

ble-digit growth for the past decade with "no real end in sight" and the new brand should help customers capitalize on the trend. The organic spuds will be sourced initially from growers in areas such as Washington, Colorado, Wisconsin and Canada, but not Idaho.

Schwartz said Potandon has packed organic spuds for customers' private labels and had a Green Giant organic potato line years ago.

On the morning of Potandon's announcement, Schwartz said three customers immediately committed to carry the product and "several others are waiting for details."

Chris Wada, marketing director for Wada Farms, said his company intends to sell organ-

ic spuds in eco-friendly bags made of potato starch, called Tater Made.

"It will be a continuing trend and focus for us to grow our organic product offerings," Wada said.

Eagle Eye Produce in Idaho Falls started packing organic russets six years ago and has gradually grown its organic business every year, said Lance Poole, the company's vice president of sales. Poole said his company has a dedicated facility to handle organic spuds, and production costs are coming down as companies have developed better organic fertilizers and other inputs.

When Eagle Eye started in organic potatoes, Poole said, they could only store

them for three months. With improved storage methods and technology, he said, Eagle Eye now stores organic spuds into June.

Poole said organic potatoes remain a niche market but "we're seeing a lot of growth in the program."

Eagle Eye has also sourced organic russets for Amy's Kitchen, a producer of organic frozen meals opening a new plant in Pocatello, to test as an alternative for the chipping varieties it now uses in its recipes.

Buhl organic farmer Mike Heath said current prices for organic processing spuds are \$12-\$13 per hundredweight. That compares with the current conventional fresh mar-

ket grower return of \$5-\$6 per hundredweight.

"I think it's great we're getting more people interested in organic right now," Heath said. "The demand is outstripping supply for sure."

According to United Fresh Produce Association, organic vegetable sales accounted for 10.2 percent of total vegetable sales during the third quarter of 2014, and organic sales volume was up 15 percent from the prior year.

"These are now big farms getting involved in the organic movement," said Idaho Potato Commission President and CEO Frank Muir. "We think it's an important part of a full portfolio of potato offerings."

Columbia-Snake irrigators push plea for water to the top

Private group wants to connect to East Low Canal

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

Rebuffed by regional officials, a private irrigation association that wants to tap the Columbia River to irrigate 14,500 acres in Central Washington has asked the head of the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation to intervene.

The Columbia-Snake River Irrigators Association has been unable to win official support for its proposal to connect to the East Low Canal to serve land north of Interstate 90 and east of Moses Lake.

The association's board representative, Darryll Olsen, said the group will go to court if the bureau's commissioner, Estevan Lopez, doesn't get involved.

"They'll end up in litigation," Olsen said. "It's not going to be very long. It's going to be sooner (rather) than later."

The association says that while the public sector continues to make plans, it has a shovel-ready project to take pressure off the depleting Odessa Subarea aquifer.

Olsen said he's offering private-sector efficiency and private-sector financing — \$42 million from 14 landowners.

The reclamation bureau, Washington Department of Ecology and East Columbia Basin Irrigation District reject the proposal.

The bureau, DOE and irrigation district are collaborating to replace Odessa groundwater with river water on some 87,000 acres in Adams, Grant, Franklin and Lincoln counties. The bureau finalized the plan in 2013.

The bureau's Columbia-Cascades area manager, Dawn Wiedmeier, said Monday that Olsen's proposal doesn't fit with that plan, which took eight years to develop.

Besides smaller in scope, Olsen's proposal includes land not eligible to receive water under the government plan, she said. "We're having a fundamentally different project."

In a paid advertisement in the Feb. 27 Capital Press, the irrigators association printed a memo it sent a week earlier to Lopez.

The memo described a long-awaited meeting with the regional director, Lori Lee, in January that left the association hopeful its proposal would be seriously considered. Since then, however, the association complained it has met with "renewed obfuscation."

"This deteriorating circumstance begs for USBR intervention from the highest level," the memo concludes.

In an interview, Olsen said the association hasn't heard yet from Lopez. If Lopez learns details about the association's proposal, particularly the part about private money on the table, he should celebrate, Olsen said.

"We've got private capital to move forward now," Olsen said. "He ought to be standing up on his desk cheering."

Seed growers exceed ring rot program requirements

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

IDAHO FALLS, Idaho — Many Idaho commercial and seed potato growers weren't content to simply meet the minimum requirements of a newly mandated test for bacterial ring rot.

Under the Idaho Crop Improvement Association's new ring rot program, certified seed beginning with generation one must undergo advanced laboratory testing at a 200-tuber sample size for lots smaller than a tenth of an acre and 400 tubers for all other lots.

However, Alan Westra, southeast area manager with Idaho Crop Improvement, has received seed lot samples as large as 6,000 tubers from seed growers seeking extra assurance for themselves or their customers.

Seed growers who submit larger than required sample sizes are charged \$50 for every 200 additional spuds. Many seed growers also pursue more stringent testing from outside laboratories.

The requirement is in response to an Idaho ring rot flare-up that started in 2012. Westra said 95 percent of Idaho seed lots have been tested this winter, encompassing well over half a million spuds, and none have been positive for ring rot.

"Over the course of time, I expect we'll demonstrate program cleanliness," Westra said.

Rupert seed grower Randy Bauscher tested his seed at a 4,400-tuber sample size, a level major processors have strongly encouraged their growers to consider.

Bauscher believes a larger sample size also makes "good



Photo submitted

Potatoes show symptoms of bacterial ring rot. Many Idaho seed growers are going well beyond the testing requirements of a new program mandating testing of seed lots at a 400-tuber sample size.

business sense."

"The testing is cheap versus having a problem," Bauscher said. "I know some growers are suing other seed growers. There are a lot of issues over this."

Mountain Home processed grower Jeff Harper requested

seed testing at a 4,400-tuber sample size, reasoning gambling with ring rot is a "good way to lose millions of dollars."

Aberdeen farmer Ritchey Toevs sent Idaho Crop Improvement the minimum sample size for seed he raised but

had a private Indiana laboratory conduct additional testing with 4,400 tubers. He said the private lab charged \$20 for every 200 tubers tested. Seed that Toevs purchased to raise commercially was also tested at a higher rate.

Pear growers get early contract from canners

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

YAKIMA, Wash. — Pacific Northwest pear growers have received their best new contract from canned pear processors in recent memory, and far earlier than usual.

Growers will be paid \$320 per ton for No. 1 Bartlett in 2015, \$340 in 2016 and \$360 in 2017, up from \$300 they received in 2014, Jay Grandy, manager of the Washington-Oregon Canning Pear Association, announced at the group's annual luncheon in Yakima, Feb. 26.

Prices slowly increased in the past 10 years after a \$280 high in 1996 following a pear shortage from a freeze and a \$177 low in 1999. The most recent three-year contract had a \$6-per-ton increase each year.

The \$20-per-ton increase in each year of the new contract shows processors trying to keep up with fresh-market prices to keep the volume they need, Grandy said.

The region's two largest canners — Del Monte Foods of San Francisco, which has a plant in Yakima, and The Neil Jones Food Co. (Northwest Packing) in Vancouver, Wash. — have agreed to sign the contract, Grandy said. The third, Seneca Foods, Marion, N.Y., with a plant in Sunnyside, Wash., has said it will not sign, Grandy said.



Grandy

The association will not negotiate a separate contract with Seneca, he said. Growers may still sell to Seneca but are not assured the contract price, he said.

Seneca officials did not respond to a request for comment.

Most canned pears are No. 1 grade Bartlett from Yakima. The new contract provides 5 percent more for No. 1A and 38 percent less for No. 2 grade, Grandy said.

Every three years, at this time of year, the association begins to negotiate a new contract for growers with canners. Typically, a contract is signed just before fall harvest. This time, an association committee starting working last fall and it resulted in an early contract.

David Garcia, association board chairman and manager of Diamond Fruit Growers, Hood River, Ore., said growers really appreciate that processors settled early.

Mike First, Del Monte manager in Yakima, praised Grandy for his professionalism and "very, very good job."

Asked later, Grandy said the good prices and early settlement had nothing to do with the fact this is his last contract negotiations before his retirement later this year.

"Del Monte isn't doing

anything that's not in its best interest," he said. "It's a great trade-off in the best interest of growers and processors in the long term."

The contract, in the third year, comes close to what growers can get for pears on the fresh market, he said.

In 1990, 73 percent of Pacific Northwest Bartlett tonnage was canned and 27 percent was sold on the fresh market. In 2014, it was close to 50-50 with 117,000 tons to canning, 114,000 tons to fresh and 6,000 tons for juice.

The shift over the past decade has been caused by more consumers preferring fresh to canned pears. Canned pear sales in grocery stores has declined. Food service outlets buy most canned pears.

"Fresh product has all the buzz but canned pears are just as good," said Rich Baldoz, national sales manager of Pacific Coast Producers, a Lodi, Calif., pear canner. He said 40 percent of PNW canned pears go to schools, 25 percent to hospitals and senior living facilities, 20 percent to colleges, daycares and prisons and 15 percent to restaurants.

Canned pears sell at about \$30 per case, up from \$19 in 2011, compared with \$20 per case for applesauce, he said. Other canned fruits and imported canned fruit is cheaper so the PNW canned pear industry has to maintain its marketing program, he said.

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