July 3, 2015 CapitalPress.com

Expert: Spud industry in good shape for FDA trans fat phase-out

By JOHN O'CONNELL

The potato industry has been proactive in finding healthier oils for fried products and should have little trouble complying with a recent federal mandate phasing out cholesterol-causing partially hydrogenated oils over the next three years, an industry expert says.

Nonetheless, images of french fries have been commonly paired lately with information about the health hazards of trans-fatty acids, according to Maureen Storey, president and CEO of the Alliance for Potato Research and Education.

The Food and Drug Administration issued a declaratory order on June 16 that partially hydrogenated — those containing trans-fatty acids that have been chemically changed from a liquid to solid state at room temperature — are no longer generally recognized as safe.

Storey explained solid trans fats are needed in many baked goods, and companies that wish to continue using them will have to petition the government to continue using them as a food additive.

Within the potato industry, however, usage of trans fats has been reduced by 88 percent from peak levels, according to a study that Storey cited.

But Storey believes the public hasn't taken notice of the potato industry's dramatic improvement. Storey said a NBC Nightly News story about the trans fat phase-out included footage of french fries. Even the American Heart Association, which certifies Idaho potatoes as heart healthy and partnered in the 2014 Great Big Idaho Potato Truck tour, included a photo of fries with information about trans fats on its website, until APRE convinced the organization to change the image.

"The oils changed a long time ago," Storey said. "That seems to have been unacknowledged or ignored."

Seeking to "set the record straight" about fried potato products, APRE sponsored a roundtable discussion with the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, featuring 10 new research papers relating to fats and oils. The papers were published in the May issue of the journal Advances in Nutrition. The paper Storey authored for the roundtable documents the steady decline in trans fat usage within the spud industry from 2005 until today.

Other papers examined how fats enable the body to properly absorb vitamins, and how different types of fats have varying effects on cholesterol and other heart disease indicators. A Pennsylvania State University paper referenced an Italian study in which participants consumed a quart of olive oil per week, with no weight gain or elevated blood lip-

"There's research now telling us maybe we don't need to reduce our total fat as we once thought," Storey said. "It's the type of fat that people need to be looking at."

Half of APRE's budget comes from the U.S. Potato Board.

"This goes to our key objective as USPB, that potatoes are healthy,' said USPB spokesman David Fraser. "They are not the vial, starchy food they've been made out to be."

Idaho spud projects receive specialty crop grants

By JOHN O'CONNELL Capital Press

BOISE — The Idaho State Department of Agriculture has awarded the state's potato industry more than \$340,000 in USDA Specialty Crop Research Block Grants toward international marketing, potato nutrition research and efforts to identify breeding material resistant to pale cyst nematode.

ISDA awarded more than \$1.74 million to support 16 projects in 2015. Final approval by USDA is expected in September, and the funding should be available by Nov. 1, according to ISDA.

The Idaho Potato Commission applied for two of the chosen spud projects. IPC President and CEO Frank Muir explained the \$125,000 PCN grant will be used to collaborate with researchers in South America and Europe, where the hardy pest is prevalent, to identify resistant potato germplasm to support regional breeding, aimed at developing the first PCN-resistant Russet.

"This is a longterm project," Muir said. "We believe this is a

very important first step for us.' Idaho is the only U.S. state with a known infestation of PCN — a microscopic worm that feeds on potato roots. Fifteen growers in a small quarhave filed a federal lawsuit against ISDA and USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, alleging their program to eradicate PCN lacked input from affected growers and has financially burdened them.

Though APHIS still believes the program is yielding positive results, the agency has suspended use of methyl bromide — a critical tool for fumigating fields with PCN — following complaints in the growers' lawsuit that the chemical has made farm crops such as hay toxic.

Muir said the project to breed a PCN-resistant spud is an effort to "plan for the best

and prepare for the worst." "Our plan working with USDA and ISDA is to eradicate PCN in Idaho, but we want to make sure we have a backup plan in the event that it takes longer than anticipated, or for whatever might happen," Muir said.

Muir said the Potato Variety Management Institute could also market a PCN-resistant Russet in Europe and other countries where PCN is found.

IPC was also awarded about \$133,000 to promote the Idaho potato brand in foreign countries through training, store promotions, trade shows, trade missions and face-to-face meetings over the next two years.

Muir said the funding will be focused on Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam, aiming to build upon market development efforts by the U.S. Potato Board.

"We target the high-end grocery stores and restaurants where they aren't just targeting the U.S., but they're targeting the premium U.S. products, which for potatoes would be Idaho," Muir said, adding Idaho has a freight disadvantage compared markets nearer to ports and needs a higher price to make international exports feasible.



Roger Isom, president and CEO of the Western Agricultural Processors Association, checks the nut set in a deficit-irrigated almond orchard near Mendota, Calif., this spring. The Almond Board of California asserts per-pound use of water for almonds has declined by 33 percent in the last 20 years.

Almond board deflects criticism, sets \$2.5 million for research

By TIM HEARDEN Capital Press

MODESTO, Calif. — An almond group has announced plans to spend \$2.5 million in the next year on research into what it calls "next-generation farming practices" as the industry seeks to deflect criti-

cism of its water use. The Almond Board of California has approved 56 studies for the next fiscal year, including 13 projects focused on water use efficiency and nine that seek to improve honeybee health.

The board touted the projects as it noted that earlier industry-funded research has helped growers reduce their amount of water per pound of almonds by 33 percent over the last 20 years while also developing better orchard practices for honeybees.

"We've been caught up in the blame game and the shame game" as California endures a fourth straight year of drought, Almond Board chief executive officer Richard Waycott told reporters in a conference call.

"We feel that's not a comfortable place to be, but I think our industry has done a lot" to conserve, he said. "We're focusing on the future and on solutions."

The announcement comes as almonds have been portrayed by environmentalists and in some news stories as a particularly water-thirsty crop, requiring, as The Associated Press put it, more water than all the showering, dishwashing and other indoor water use of California's 39 million people.

Further, the industry has been stung by reports of massive bee die-offs after almond blossom, which some have blamed on growers' use of pesticides. The deaths of billions of individual bees after last year's bloom prompted the Almond Board to develop best-practices guidelines that suggest growers consult with beekeepers while planning their insecticide and fungicide applications.

Still, almonds have grown in popularity as research has found it to be a healthy snack

or food additive. For instance, a study published in Europe earlier this year found that women who snack on almonds in the morning are less likely to overeat at later meals.

Despite the drought, productive almond acreage last year reached a historic high of 880,000 acres statewide, according to the National Agricultural Statistics Service. While almonds are more water-intensive than some row crops, big returns help growers afford the skyrocketing cost of water, Roger Isom of Western Agricultural Processors Association said recently.

The California Almond Board estimates it takes 400 gallons of water to produce a pound of almonds, or between three-quarters to a full gallon per kernal. It adds that three usable products — kernal, shell and hull — are produced.

Because of previous water-efficiency research, more than 70 percent of almond orchards use drip or micro-sprinkler systems and 83 percent of growers water based on the specific needs of their trees, said Bob Curtis, the Almond Board's director of agricultural affairs.

Idaho wheat growers deal with chloride deficiency

By JOHN O'CONNELL Capital Press

ARBON VALLEY, Idaho -A crop health problem that causes bright, yellow spots in wheat, caused by chloride deficiency in soils but often confused with other diseases by growers, has surfaced in Eastern Idaho fields this season.

University of Idaho Extension cereals pathologist Juliet Marshall explained the condition, known as physiological leaf spot, can reduce yields by up to 10 percent.

Most common in winter wheat, Marshall believes physiological leaf spot has been more widespread than normal in the region due to cloudy, cool weather in May, which impeded plants' abilities to absorb micronutrients. She advises growers who notice the condition in their fields to apply up to 10 pounds per acre of potassium chloride to their fields before their next grain crop.

Marshall has found most growers are unaware of physiological leaf spot. This season, she's diagnosed it mostly while evaluating fields for other grower concerns, such as cereal cyst nematode. She said the condition could easily be mistaken for early signs of stripe rust, leading growers to needlessly apply fungicide.

"If they see a crop yellowing

a little bit or see some unusual symptoms, they're just going to spray fungicide," Marshall said. "That is a tendency."

Marshall said some of the soft white winter wheat varieties raised in the Palouse region of Idaho, Oregon and Washington are the most susceptible to physiological leaf spot. She said Clearfield wheat varieties commonly grown in southeast Idaho are also highly susceptible. Indeed, David Hole, wheat breeder at Utah State University's Small Grains Research facility, has noticed severe physiological leaf spot this season in the hard red winter wheat Lucin Clearfield.

Mike Erickson, a seed treatment specialist with McGregor Co., said the problem is most common in dryland grain fields, as irrigated growers often apply chloride for their high-value root crops. Erickson said one of his company's researchers, Steve Reinertsen, concluded in research in the Palouse that growers should add supplemental chloride if soil tests confirm chloride levels within the top 2 feet of their soil are below 30 pounds per acre.

Dick Smiley, an Oregon State University emeritus professor of plant pathology, was the first to diagnose the problem in the Palouse in the early 1990s, when growers were mystified by yellow spots on flag leaves.



John O'Connell/Capital Press

University of Idaho Extension cereals pathologist Juliet Marshall discusses crop issues including physiological leaf spot during a June 17 field day on Hans Hayden's dryland farm in Arbon Valley, Idaho.

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