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Farm leaders happy with new ag college dean

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

MOSCOW, Idaho — Idaho's farming industry has responded well to University of Idaho's announcement that Michael Parrella will be the new dean of the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences.

Parrella, who serves as the chair of the University of California-Davis Department of Entomology and Nematology and associate dean of that university's agricultural sciences department, will take over as dean of CALS on Feb. 1.

A 14-person advisory committee that began a nationwide search for the new CALS dean in January narrowed the pool of candidates to eight people who were interviewed in Moscow and also met ag industry leaders in Boise.

"I met all eight candidates ... and he clearly rose to the top in my mind," Idaho Barley Commission Administrator Kelly Olson said of Parrella. "I liked his energy, his passion and he had fresh ideas. I really connected well with him."

Olson said Parrella also "demonstrated a very strong record working with the California ag industry," a sentiment echoed by others.

Michael Parrella

"He seemed to have a good rapport with industry (and) he understood private and public partnerships real well, which is important because land-grant universities are going to have to partner more with private entities to get the things we need to get done with agriculture and the university," said Wilder farmer Doug Gross.

"The industry stakeholders on the advisory committee are extremely happy that he's able to join us," said Idaho Dairymen's Association Executive Director Bob Naerebout, a search committee member.

Parrella said his interaction with ag industry stakeholders in Boise was positive and an important reason he accepted the position.

He also said he did some homework on Idaho agriculture before he came here to be interviewed and he was struck by how important farming and ranching are to the state.

California's total farm gate receipts are much higher than any other state's but farming accounts for a much greater percentage of Idaho's gross state product, he said.

"Agriculture is very important to the state of Idaho (and) people look to (CALS) for solutions to their problems," he said. "To be a part of that is pretty exciting."

He also said that while he understands California agriculture, "that doesn't make me an expert in Idaho agriculture. I need to listen to the stakeholders and learn (from them)."

According to a UI news release, Parrella's research focuses on developing integrated pest management programs for greenhouse and nursery crops, with an emphasis on biological control.

He was recently named vice president-elect of the Entomological Society of America.

Parrella, who was born and raised in New Jersey, has a bachelor's degree in animal science from Rutgers University and a master's and doctorate degrees in entomology from Virginia Tech.

"A number of stakeholders appreciated that he was an entomologist with a 'hard' science background," Food Producers of Idaho Executive Director Rick Waitley said in the UI news release.

John O'Connell/Capital Press

Children play a bean bag toss game to win Spuddy Buddy toys as the Great Big Idaho Potato Truck visits the McDonald's restaurant in Chubbuck, Idaho. The truck made visits to Chubbuck and Blackfoot, Idaho, to help McDonald's celebrate potato harvest.

Potato truck returns to Idaho from fourth tour

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

CHUBBUCK, Idaho — The Idaho Potato Commission's Great Big Idaho Potato Truck is back in Idaho and making appearances at local events to wrap up a fourth U.S. tour.

IPC President and CEO Frank Muir said the truck's latest tour covered 22,000 miles, with stops in 50 cities and seven events attended by more than 350,000 people.

"It's one of those iconic experiences," Muir said. "You'll never forget where you were the first time you saw the Idaho Potato Truck."

Major stops included the Kentucky Derby, the National Memorial Day Parade in Arlington, Va., the Fourth of July Parade in Galveston, Texas, Seafair in Seattle and the Nascar race in Bristol Tenn.

On Oct. 3, the truck visited the Chubbuck McDonald's to join in the restaurant's celebration of Idaho potato harvest. Visitors were invited to take photographs with the truck and Ronald McDonald, and children were awarded Spuddy Buddy toys for winning a bean bag toss game. A similar McDonald's event was hosted in Blackfoot on Oct. 4.

Muir said the current tour will end with a few additional stops in Western Idaho.

IPC has spent roughly $700,000 on each tour, Muir said. The 6-ton replica russet Burbank on a flat-bed trailer traveled to raise awareness about the Meals on Wheels program for homebound seniors in its first two years, and supported the American Heart Association's Go Red for Women campaign in its third year. Both organizations received donations from IPC.

During the most recent tour, the truck's philanthropic theme was "a big helping," with funds directed at charitable causes of local interest at various stops.

Muir explained IPC donated $1 for every visitor's signature on a poster board to a designated local charity, with a maximum donation capped at $500. The maximum was reached at every stop. Muir said supporting local charities helped increase public and media interest, and IPC plans to use the same strategy during its fifth tour, which will depart next spring. Muir said charitable donations from the tour totaled less than $10,000.

John O'Connell/Capital Press

Idaho Falls grower James Hoff stands by the Boeing Stearman biplane he piloted in an Idaho Potato Commission commercial in this file photo from December 2014. Hoff has been chosen as the newest IPC board member.

Idaho Falls grower to join IPC board

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

EAGLE, Idaho — James Hoff is a small-scale potato producer by modern standards, raising 250 acres of Russet Burbanks for the fresh market this season.

But lately, the Idaho Falls grower has been making a large impact on his industry.

During its October meeting, the Idaho Potato Commission will appoint Hoff, 47, to replace departing board member Boyd Foster, of Ririe.

Last fall, Hoff — a pilot with a small fleet of vintage airplanes in a hangar on his farm — co-starred in an Idaho Potato Commission commercial, in which he piloted his 1943 Boeing Stearman biplane in search of the "missing" Great Big Idaho Potato Truck.

Hoff has also served two six-year terms with the U.S. Potato Board, with his most recent term ending in 2013, and ended his tenure as president of Potato Growers of Idaho in January.

Idaho Gov. Butch Otter appointed Hoff from three nominees.

"It's quite an honor and a privilege to be able to serve the Idaho potato industry at that level," Hoff said.

He was nominated by American Falls grower Klaren Koompin.

"James is very bright and very engaged in the potato industry, and he has a good background," Koompin said.

IPC Commissioner Randy Hardy, of Oakley, believes Hoff made great strides with PGI, a political action committee that supports state lawmakers who back the potato industry. During his five-year tenure, Hoff helped increase PGI's annual fundraising from roughly $18,000 to about $45,000.

As PGI president, Hoff also occasionally attended IPC meetings to report on his organization and got to know some of the staff and other board members.

"The biggest thing for me is that Idaho retains its strong identity as the potato state," said Hoff, who credits IPC with creating that perception.

Hoff's personal efforts build Idaho potato awareness haven't gone unnoticed. For a few days of his ongoing harvest, he hosted a German film maker producing a documentary about Idaho, who saw the airplane commercial. He also received a letter from crop duster pilot who researched the Stearman's registration number and confirmed he'd flown it in the 1960s.

Hoff's farm was purchased in 1903 by his great-grandfather. He and his wife, Dara, have two daughters, Savannah, 19, and Paige, 15.

Also during the meeting, commissioners Dan Nakamura and Lynn Wilcox will be sworn in for their second three-year terms.

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Zebra chip confirmed in 4 Idaho fields

Capital Press

KIMBERLY, Idaho — Zebra chip disease has now been confirmed from fields in four Idaho counties, according to University of Idaho Extension storage specialist Nora Olsen.

Olsen said the most recent infected tubers were found during harvest in Twin Falls County on Sept. 25 and in Minidoka County on Sept. 28. The first confirmed infection was reported in Ada county on Aug. 13, followed by a confirmed infection in Power County on Sept. 10.

Olsen said each county's case involved a couple of tubers, at most, from a single field. Olsen said the tubers were discovered either during test digs or random crop sampling.

Zebra chip, caused by the Liberibacter bacterium, first arrived in the Pacific Northwest in 2011 and is spread by tiny, winged potato psyllids. It's characterized by patterns throughout tuber flesh that darken during frying. There were no confirmed cases in Idaho tubers last season.