

Fresh spud packers grow organic category

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

IDAHO FALLS — Officials with two large fresh potato packing operations in Eastern Idaho say they're working to increase their product offerings in the growing organic category.

Wada Farms, based in Pingree, intends to make its first organic spud shipments during the work week beginning Oct. 26. Idaho Falls-based Potandon Produce is exploring options to grow its overall organic supply base, said Ralph Schwartz, vice president of

sales, marketing and innovation.

Schwartz said his company started supplying organic spuds about five years ago and has seen steady growth of about 2.5 percent per year. Last year, Potandon created its own organic label, featuring 3-pound bags of russets, reds and yellows.

Schwartz said Potandon contracts for organic spuds with established organic growers in Washington, Colorado and Wisconsin.

"We anticipate (organic) to continue to grow," Schwartz said. "I think it is here to stay.

A lot of the younger generation, they pay attention to what they consume and what they put into their bodies."

Wada Farms planted its first organic spud crop this spring and recently harvested 100 combined acres of certified organic russets, reds and golds in Eastern Idaho, said Kevin Stanger, vice president of sales and marketing. Stanger said Wada had a good first organic crop, with yields roughly 60 percent of conventional spuds. Wada intends to increase to 150 to 200 organic acres next season, Stanger said.

"We're trying to diversify

our risk in the marketplace from growing 100 percent conventional Russet Burbanks," Stanger said.

Stanger said the addition of organic spuds is also aimed at improving customer convenience. "We had a lot of customers who would always ask us, 'Hey, do you do organics?' And it's not like they need a truckload, just a pallet here and there," Stanger said.

Stanger said Wada used a lot of manual weed control in its organic acreage, hiring about 20 Shoshone-Bannock Tribal members to aid in roguing fields. Growing organic

potatoes also necessitates that Wada raise organic rotation crops in years in which spuds aren't planted.

To meet USDA organic certification, producers must use only organic-approved products on their fields for three years, among other requirements. Shilo Murdoch, a farm manager with Wada, said his company has leased ground that had been left fallow in recent years and improved irrigation systems for organic production. In addition to the current organic spud crop, Murdoch said Wada planted some wheat for

organic flour and mustard as a cover crop, due to mustard's ability to act as a natural fumigant in lieu of chemicals that can't be used in organic production. The wheat and mustard fields will be planted in organic spuds next season.

"We probably don't have a large enough land base for our organic program right now," Murdoch said. "We're going to be looking for some more ground."

Murdoch said longer rotations between potatoes will be important in Wada's organic production to help break up disease cycles.

Environmentalists target Snake River dams — again

By NICHOLAS K. GERANIOS
Associated Press

SPOKANE — The issue of breaching four giant dams on the Snake River to help endangered salmon runs has percolated in the Northwest for decades, but the idea has gained new momentum.

Following renewed political pressure to remove the dams, people who oppose the structures gathered Oct. 3 on the Snake River in up to 200 boats. They unfurled a giant banner that said, "Free The Snake."

"The groundswell that is occurring right now to remove the four dams is like nothing I've seen since 1998," said Sam Mace, director of an anti-dam group called Save Our Wild Salmon.

Critics say the dams kill vast numbers of salmon and steelhead, and do not provide enough benefits to compensate for the losses of those iconic fish.

A look at the arguments on both sides:

Remove the dams

A coalition of environmentalists, Indian tribes and outdoor enthusiasts want Lower Granite, Little Goose, Lower Monumental and Ice Harbor dams breached. The dams were built in the 1960s and 1970s.

Migrating fish died by the thousands this summer because of higher-than-normal water temperatures in the reservoirs.

In January, a petition containing more than 70,000 signatures asking to remove the dams was delivered to the Obama administration, Mace said.

Those who want the dams removed argue that they harm fish and disrupt the food chain for larger species.

Young fish have trouble negotiating the reservoirs and can get lost and die. Longer spawning journeys also leave fish exhausted and depleted when they finally reach the ocean.

Killer whales in the Pacific Ocean depend on chinook salmon as a mainstay of their diets, and would be helped if the dams were breached, said Deborah Giles of the Southern Resident Killer Whale Chinook Salmon Initiative.

Meanwhile, central Idaho communities that depend on tourism would benefit if the

dams were removed, as fishing seasons would expand, dam opponents say.

Opponents contend that the shipping traffic made possible by the dams is in sharp decline and that the hydropower produced by the dams can be replaced with alternative energy resources.

The effort to remove the dams was stymied during the administration of President George W. Bush, who visited Eastern Washington to declare that the dams would not be removed under his watch.

Save the dams

The four dams have plenty of supporters, said Kristin Meira, director of the Pacific Northwest Waterways Association in Portland, Oregon.

In 2012, 10 percent of all U.S. wheat exports moved through the Snake River dams, she said.

"During the peak fall transportation season, barges and cruise ships can be seen alongside salmon fishermen throughout the Columbia and Snake River System," David Doeringsfeld, manager of the Port of Lewiston, said.

Bill Flory, a wheat farmer in Lewiston, said the dams are a vital part of his business.

"The dams give me the ability to load my grain in Lewiston, and I know without question that four days later it will have been loaded on a ship in Portland, ready for export," Flory said.

A tugboat pushing four barges is moving 400,000 to 480,000 bushels of wheat, dam supporters say. It would take some 538 semi-trucks or 140 rail cars to move the same amount.

Dam supporters also contend that salmon runs are recovering. The Snake River dams are equipped with sophisticated fish ladders that allow returning salmon to reach spawning grounds.

"We're seeing more salmon in the Columbia and Snake Rivers than before Bonneville Dam was put in place," Meira said.

In addition, the four dams produce enough electricity to power a city the size of Seattle, said Terry Flores of Northwest RiverPartners, a pro-dam group.

Chamber committee supports right-to-farm disclosure on land sales

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

CALDWELL, Idaho — The Nampa and Caldwell chambers of commerce joint agribusiness committee is supporting legislation that could provide agricultural operations with protection from nuisance complaints.

It would require a right-to-farm disclosure on land sales near farms or ranches.

People who purchase property near an agricultural operation would be required to sign a disclosure form saying they are aware that a variety of farming-related activities may occur in the area that could be inconvenient to them or cause them discomfort.

That includes the use of chemicals, dust, odors, noise from tractors and other machinery and harvesting and planting.

The disclosure would let the purchaser know these activities are protected by the state's Right to Farm Act. It would be required to be signed at closing and the document would be included with the property's deed.

"It's really an educational process as much as anything else," said former state Rep. Darrell Bolz, who added the wording to the committee's position statement after being contacted by a former Washington resident who told him a similar disclosure has helped farmers in Skagit County, Wash.

The Skagit County Right-to-Manage Natural Resource Lands Disclosure tells people who buy homes near natural resource operations that they "should be prepared to accept



Sean Ellis/Capital Press

Corn is harvested in a field near Homedale, Idaho, on Oct. 6. An Idaho chamber of commerce committee is supporting legislation that could provide farmers and ranchers a buffer from nuisance complaints.

"If we could just educate people about what's happening with agriculture, that would be helpful."

Former state Rep. Darrell Bolz

such incompatibilities, inconveniences or discomfort from normal, necessary natural resource land operations when performed in compliance with best management practices and local, state and federal law."

Support of such legislation in Idaho was added to the agribusiness committee's agriculture position statement, which is sent to every state legislator.

"If we could just educate

agriculture committee," he said.

The person who recommended the idea to Bolz told him in an email that the disclosure form has worked well in Skagit County, where many farmers and ranchers are facing the same rapid development pressure as farmers in Idaho's Treasure Valley.

"I can tell you that this procedure has served the agricultural interests in Skagit County well to date," he stated. "I hear complaints about the difficulties non-ag folks buying houses in the rural areas of Canyon County are creating. This is a partial solution that has withstood the test of time."

Salvage logging sales offered following wildfires

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — Idaho officials are offering 15 salvage logging sales following a summer of wildfires and are looking at recovering \$13.7 million in firefighting costs for two blazes possibly started by negligence.

The salvage sales total about 88 million board feet,

officials with the Idaho Department of Lands told the Idaho Land Board Oct. 20.

The 15 salvage logging sales are the most state officials could recall. Such sales produce about 50 to 60 percent of the revenue of what would have been expected had the trees not burned.

Money from state timber sales mostly goes to public schools.

The Idaho Land Board also went into a closed session to discuss potential litigation to recover firefighting costs from two northern Idaho fires. "They're still investigating to see how successful we can be in pursuing those," Gov. Butch Otter said after the meeting.

Another fire listed as human-caused currently burning about 40 miles northeast of Boise was also discussed in the open portion of the meeting as one that state officials might seek reimbursement for from a potential negligent party. That fire, which started Oct. 10 and destroyed three cabins, is listed at 100 percent contained, with crews on Tuesday doing mop-up work and rehabilitation.

Overall, Idaho taxpayers are on the hook for about \$60 million in firefighting costs so far year.

Idaho State Forester David Groeschl told Land Board members that the amount of Idaho Endowment Land burned this year was about six times the 20-year average. A low snowpack in northern Idaho combined with the month of June being 11 degrees above normal set the stage with tinder-dry forests, state officials said.

Early predictions indicate that next year's wildfire sea-

son in northern Idaho could be similar, Groeschl said. He also said the state's fire season was getting longer, with the historical end in September more often now in October.

Land Board member Brandon Woolf, the state controller, asked Groeschl if this year's type of fire season could be expected more often in future years. "As far as if this is the new norm, we're planning as if it will be," Groeschl told the board.

After the meeting, Groeschl said that meant state officials planned to work with local fire entities to get quick responses and have more pre-positioned firefighters heading into the season. Also after the meeting he said that an individual and a company are the entities the state is looking at to seek reimbursement from for the \$13.7 million.

Sometimes companies or their insurer are able to pay, Groeschl said. For individuals, he said, the state looks at such things as assets and whether an individual's home owner's insurance could pay.

Despite it being late October, Groeschl wasn't ready to declare the state clear of potential new wildfires, noting a large rain or snowstorm hadn't yet occurred. "We haven't had a season-ending event," he said.

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