

Judge rules against environmentalists on Snake River dredging

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers did everything right when dredging sediment to improve navigation on the Lower Snake River in early 2015, a federal judge has ruled.

U.S. District Judge James L. Robart ruled against a coalition of environmental groups and a tribe in their bid to sue the corps for alleged violations of the National Environmental Policy Act and Clean Water Act. The coalition claimed dredging, which is used to remove accumulated sediment that interferes with commercial navigation,

is damaging to the environment.

“Absent from Plaintiff’s declarations are any factual showings of actual harm to salmon or lamprey as a result of the Corps’ 2015 dredging activities,” Robart wrote in his ruling. “Not one of Plaintiff’s declarants specifically tether the generalized harm to fish or the environment they assert to the Corps’ particular 2015 dredging at issue here. Instead, Plaintiffs posit sweeping, generalized assertions that dredging in general is harmful to fish ... The alleged harm must be concrete and particular.”

The 2015 dredging was timed to occur when salmon

and lamprey were likely not present, Robart said.

Robart also dismissed the plaintiffs’ argument that the corps’ programmatic sediment management plan (PSMP), which monitors and plans for sediment management, violates NEPA and the Clean Water Act.

‘Clear-cut victory’

Robart concluded his ruling by saying if the plaintiffs believe that dredging is no longer in the public’s best interest, they should petition Congress and not the court.

Kristin Meira, executive director of the Pacific Northwest Waterways Association, which manages the

Inland Ports and Navigation Group, called Robart’s ruling a “clear-cut victory” for the corps and for navigation on the Lower Snake River.

“The judge ruled the plaintiffs were not appropriate in bringing this suit,” Meira said. “The Corps was completely in the clear in how they planned for dredging and how to evaluate sediment in the future. This was really fantastic news for folks who care about a balanced approach to the river system, and one that recognizes the value of goods movement as well as the environment.”

Meira doesn’t see room for an appeal from environmentalists who oppose dredging. She didn’t see anything in

Robart’s ruling that would be negative for agriculture.

‘We’re disappointed’

“Obviously, we’re disappointed,” said Kevin Lewis, conservation director with Idaho Rivers United. “There are significant issues with the Lower Snake River, with the hydrosystem, the barging, the river navigation system — we believe it is a failing system, it is costing the taxpayers millions of dollars every year to support that system.”

Lewis said his organization will look at Robart’s ruling and “move on from there.” Could future dredging projects result in further legal action?

“I don’t know if you’ll see any legal action, but you’ll certainly see continued scrutiny of the operation of the Lower Snake River system,” Lewis said.

Idaho Rivers United, Washington Wildlife Federation, Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen’s Associations, Institute for Fisheries Resources, Sierra Club, Friends of the Clearwater and the Nez Perce Tribe brought the lawsuit against the corps.

The plaintiffs, the corps and the Inland Ports and Navigation Group, intervening on behalf of the corps, all sought summary judgment from the court.

Idaho spud contracts require minimum three-year rotation

By JOHN O’CONNELL
Capital Press

BOISE — Growers represented by Southern Idaho Potato Cooperative have agreed to a provision in their 2016 processing contracts requiring them to plant at least two alternative crops between raising spuds.

As of Feb. 15, SIPCO Executive Director Dan Hargraves said his organization had finished negotiations with Lamb Weston but not J.R. Simplot Co. or McCain Foods. He declined to comment on other contract details prior to completing talks with all three companies but said the minimum rotation clause has broad support and isn’t in question.

Hargraves said some spud growers, including a few Fort Hall producers who raise spuds every other year on sandy soils, have already fumigated fields and prepared ground, and the processors will grant them an exception from the policy this season.

Hargraves explained a longer rotation between spuds reduces the need for farm inputs, helps control pests and diseases and improves yields and quality.

“It was something that was wholeheartedly supported by both sides, and they understood there may need to be some exceptions as they work

into it,” Hargraves said.

David Smith, senior director of agricultural services with Lamb Weston, said the majority of growers already practices minimum three-year rotations.

“We’re proud to work with growers who value our resources as much as we do and appreciate the positive impact crop rotation has on soil health, disease prevention and overall sustainability,” Smith said.

SIPCO President Mark Darrington, a Declo grower, doubts the policy will have a great impact on planted potato acreage, but he said a minimum three-year rotation is a “best management practice,” and annual audits required of processed growers will make certain guidelines are met.

Aberdeen farmer Ritchey Toevs, a SIPCO member on the Idaho Potato Commission, believes the minimum rotation requirement combined with a water call settlement forcing many well users to reduce their groundwater consumption could raise interest in in-season cover crops, planted only for soil health benefits, as a water-efficient option.

Toevs also believes the policy will cause upward pressure on land rents and make planning tougher, but he agrees the policy is “the right thing to do.”

Campaigns aim to change potato perceptions

By JOHN O’CONNELL
Capital Press

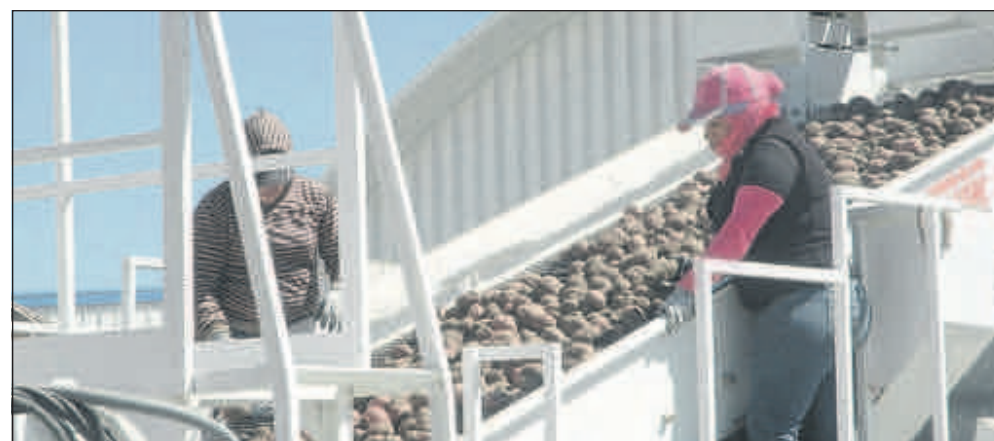
EAGLE, Idaho — Though the commodity they champion is often described as “humble,” officials with the Idaho Potato Commission and U.S. Potato Board aim to convince the public through their new campaigns that the spud is better viewed as a potassium powerhouse and the “ninth wonder of the world.”

IPC’s heightened focus on educating the public about the rich potassium content in potatoes stems from the results of a recent online survey of 1,000 consumers the organization commissioned.

Just 27 percent of respondents in the survey, conducted by the research firm Kelton Global, associated potatoes with potassium. By contrast, 89 percent of respondents identified bananas as a rich source of the vital nutrient.

IPC President and CEO Frank Muir said the banana industry has centered its marketing around potassium for several years, but potatoes contain double the potassium.

Muir said potassium is critical for helping the body regulate blood pressure and maintaining heart health, and USDA estimates 97 percent of Americans don’t



John O’Connell/Capital Press

Workers clean and load red potatoes following harvest Sept. 11 in the Pleasant Valley area of southeast Idaho. The size profile of the crop appears to be up, while the number of tubers is down.

consume enough potassium.

“The USDA has indicated two elements need to be more in consumers’ diets — potassium and dietary fiber — and it just so happens those two are significant in a potato,” Muir said.

In 2011, IPC got the Idaho potato certified as heart healthy with the American Heart Association. Muir said about 20 shippers are now licensed to use the AHA heart health checkmark on packaging, since IPC renegotiated its AHA contract and began covering shippers’ licensing fees.

In February, IPC hosted a “satellite media tour,” inviting lifestyle expert Michelle Yarn to discuss potato nutri-

tion in TV health segments that reached 10 million viewers, Muir said. In March, registered dietitian Toby Amidor will discuss the importance of potatoes and potassium in a balanced diet during a syndicated radio program that will reach 3 million listeners. IPC has scheduled a Twitter party for 6 p.m. Mountain Time on March 2, using #idahopotato, and will conduct a potassium campaign on social media.

USPB’s new marketing campaign, called The Ninth Wonder of the World, targets the growing “food enthusiast” population segment.

Food enthusiasts are known for an “adventurous culinary spirit,” and they appreciate

that potatoes offer variety versatility and the ability to be paired with many foods and flavors, according to a USPB press release.

“Food enthusiasts, the USPB’s newest consumer segment, represent a large portion of the population and are defined by their love of food, as well as their desire to explore culinary creations from around the world,” the press release reads.

USPB officials said the campaign will utilize print and digital advertising and social media. Professional chefs will help USPB develop creative new potato dishes throughout the year, and will also offer new potato product ideas to food manufacturers.



John O’Connell/Capital Press

Don Wille, CEO of Thresher Artisan Wheat, speaks during his company’s recent seed meeting in Idaho Falls. He warned growers premiums they’ve enjoyed on soft white wheat relative to hard wheat varieties likely won’t continue much longer.

Wheat leaders anticipate erosion of soft white premium

By JOHN O’CONNELL
Capital Press

IDAHO FALLS, Idaho — Some wheat industry experts are warning growers the price premium soft white wheat has held over hard varieties for several months is unlikely to persist, and they shouldn’t shift acres toward soft white this spring.

“In a year where nothing pencils, the best thing to do is stick with your rotation and work with what grows best on your ground,” said Don Wille, CEO of Thresher Artisan Wheat.

Typically, Wille said, hard wheat enjoys a roughly 50-cent premium over soft wheat. Hard wheat tends to have higher levels of gluten and protein, for use in breads and baked goods that rise. It’s relatively finicky and costs more to grow, requiring farmers to apply more fertilizer to meet minimum protein requirements.

Lower protein is desirable in soft wheat, popular in noodles and flat breads, and among livestock feeders. Yet soft wheat is now trading at a 13-cent premium to hard wheat.

“I have heard from numerous people on, ‘Why in the heck should I plant protein wheats when soft white pencils out better for me now,’” Wille

said. “I’m 95 percent certain this relationship we have today will not be there when we get to harvest time.”

Alex Bassett, a broker with F.C. Stone in Kansas City, said soft wheat has held its unusual premium to hard wheat for eight months on the futures market, and longer on the cash market.

For the past two seasons, Bassett said the major soft wheat production areas — the Northwest and the Midwest — have experienced challenging conditions. In the Northwest, especially Eastern Washington, severe drought has cut soft white yields and caused elevated protein levels. Bassett has heard Asian markets plan to start docking growers for elevated soft white protein this season.

In the Midwest, soft red winter growers were “pounded” with rainfall at harvest, causing problems with Fusarium headblight and milling quality, Bassett said. Plains farmers who skimped on inputs had horrific problems with rust, he said.

Soil moisture has been ample in the major soft wheat regions for the current fall crop, and Bassett said there “really haven’t been any cold snaps to concern anybody about damage so far.”

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