

U.S. potato product exports see growth

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

DENVER — U.S. potato product exports resumed growth during the first seven months of Fiscal Year 2016 after dropping for the first time in a decade during the previous fiscal year, according to a recently released trade report.

U.S. frozen and dehydrated potato exports increased significantly from July 2015 year through January. Though fresh exports to Canada plummeted, several foreign markets also saw healthy growth in the fresh category.

USPB Chief Marketing Officer John Toasperm attributes much of the improvement to his organization's efforts to address foreign market concerns following disruptions caused by a labor slowdown at West Coast ports.

"A lot of the decline last year was definitely due to the port issues," Toasperm said. "We've done a lot of work to regain those markets."

According to Global Trade Atlas, U.S. frozen exports during the seven months were up 10.81 percent, at 565,184 metric tons. Honduras and Guatemala were among the bright spots, with frozen exports to those countries up roughly 30 percent at 2,112 metric tons and up 18.81 percent at 11,048 metric tons respectively.

"Other important market



Courtesy of U.S. Potato Board

U.S. Potato Board promotional materials are displayed in Japan. The organization believes its efforts to restore foreign markets where spud shipments were disrupted by the recent labor slowdown at West Coast ports has helped to restore a positive export trend.

growth has been occurring throughout Asia," Toasperm said. "We're recovering from last year and making market gains even beyond that."

Exports of dehydrated potatoes — the lone category to see a gain during the first seven months of FY 2015 — continued positive movement through the same period in FY 2016, growing 17.43 percent overall to 84,323 metric tons, led by hefty gains in Mexico, the United Kingdom, Korea and the Philippines. Toasperm said the Philippines started producing snacks from dehydrated potatoes, resulting in a

120 percent export increase to 5,282 metric tons.

Fresh exports for the first seven months of FY 2016 dropped by 8.36 percent to 223,153 metric tons. There was strong fresh growth in Mexico, where exports were up by 27 percent to 60,504 metric tons, and in Honduras, where fresh exports rose 20.57 percent to 4,572 metric tons. Canada, however, bought 84,547 metric tons of fresh U.S. spuds, representing a 21.41 percent decrease. Toasperm said Canadian growers increased their own fresh production, especially

of chipping potatoes.

Toasperm believes the generally positive export trend confirms foreign markets are willing to pay a premium, despite the strong dollar, for high-quality potatoes, and that foreign restaurants and distributors value USPB's marketing support.

Idaho Potato Commission President and CEO Frank Muir said his organization is also active in foreign markets and has opened access for Idaho fresh potatoes into the Philippines and Taiwan during the current fiscal year. In Singapore and Malaysia, customers have Idaho potato logos wrapped on their supply trucks, he said.

"It's not a surprise," Muir said of the export trend. "There was significant growth taking place internationally before the port slowdown that help back supply, but it didn't hold back demand."

Lamb Weston spokeswoman Shelby Stoolman said increasing demand is among the reasons her company plans to expand its Boardman, Ore., facility.

"Last year was impacted heavily by the slowdown at the West Coast ports," Stoolman said. "That said, we are encouraged by increased demand for fries and frozen potato products domestically and internationally, which means we have a big opportunity to support our customers' plans here and abroad."

OSHA plans surprise ag inspections in Idaho

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

BOISE — Federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration managers plan to start random, surprise worker-safety inspections of Idaho farms, dairies and ranches, based on concerns about recent agricultural workplace fatalities.

Dave Kearns, area director of OSHA's Boise office, said he's making revisions to a draft inspection policy created by his staff.

The policy will then be forwarded to OSHA's Seattle office for review by officials and attorneys, and Kearns hopes to have the document in the hands of the agency's national office for final approval within a few months.

"Most of the (agricultural) inspections we do now are in response to a tragic incident," Kearns said, adding that complaints also occasionally trigger inspections.

Kearns said there's been a spike in Idaho's agricultural deaths since 2012.

Since last April, he said

four of 10 OSHA-investigated workplace fatalities in Idaho have involved agriculture — an ATV roll-over, a feed wagon backed over a dairy worker on an ATV, an 18-year-old day laborer succumbed to heat exposure while weeding a wheat field and a worker drowned in a dairy lagoon.

"It used to be there'd be one or two or maybe no agricultural deaths," Kearns said. "A few (operations) may be putting forth real efforts at worker safety, but as a whole, the agricultural community in Idaho has got a long ways to go make safe and healthy workplaces a part of their culture."

Kearns explained the policy won't represent a new rule, which would necessitate an extensive public scoping process, but will rather be a "special emphasis program" OSHA is authorized to create at the national, regional or local level based on "hazards that are serious and need special attention." No public comment will be taken on the inspection policy, which will apply to operations with more than 10 non-family workers, Kearns said.

FDA releases final acrylamide guidance

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

WASHINGTON, D.C. — U.S. potato industry leaders say the federal Food and Drug Administration's recent release of final guidance on managing for acrylamide — a potentially unhealthy chemical found in certain starchy foods cooked at high temperatures — should provide closure on an issue that once threatened their long-term profitability.

Acrylamide, formed by a chemical reaction during frying or baking, was discovered in food in 2002 and identified during subsequent testing as a possible carcinogen, causing concern among regulators.

The new guidance is focused on french fries and potato chips, coffee and grain-based foods including cookies, crackers, breakfast cereals and toast. Public comments may be submitted at www.regulations.gov.

The potato industry worked proactively with FDA, making acrylamide its No. 1 research priority, according to a website about a \$7.8 million USDA Specialty Crop Research Initiative acrylamide grant span-

ning from September 2011 through Aug. 31, 2016. The grant funded a multi-state, cooperative effort to breed low-acrylamide varieties.

The final guidance, issued March 10, outlines nonbinding suggestions growers, manufacturers and food service operators may follow to reduce acrylamide accumulation. Industry sources say little changed in the final document from a draft issued in November 2013, and the standards are consistent with their current processing practices.

The guidelines offer suggestions on reducing acrylamide formation through a variety of practices such as potato handling, storage temperature, fry and chip cutting, variety selection, trimming of defects, sprout management, frying temperature and reconditioning, which entails warming spuds prior to processing to allow sugars to convert back to starch.

"The original guidance wasn't a surprise to anybody, and in many ways it reflected the conversations the industry and FDA had in the years leading up to that," said Paul Bethke, a research plant physiologist

with USDA's Agricultural Research Service in Madison, Wis.

Bethke said FDA's guidance recognizes certain practices that lower acrylamide aren't practical because they impair product quality. Jeanne Debons, executive director of the Potato Variety Management Institute, which oversees licensing of Northwest potato varieties, described the acrylamide issue as a "storm in a teacup."

Debons believes nonbinding recommendations are appropriate for acrylamide, which has never been definitively classified as a health risk, and the guidance demonstrates FDA is "closing the door on the acrylamide story."

Washington State University potato specialist Mark Pavek believes the low-acrylamide breeding effort, which produced varieties such as Payette Russet, fostered cooperation among programs. He said the industry strives to develop light-frying varieties with low sugars for improved color and storage. He said lowering sugars also lowers acrylamide potential.

Simplot Plant Sciences spokesman Doug Cole was pleased that the final guidance added language acknowledging

the six biotech potato varieties his company has engineered with low acrylamide levels.

"The potato industry was following the intent of the draft guidelines since they first came out a few years ago, but it's good to have them finalized," Cole said. "We were pleased that FDA stated that new biotech varieties may ultimately provide the most effective solution for acrylamide reduction and should be considered for adoption."

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