East Idaho spud growers wary of bruising at harvest's start

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

John O'Connell/Capital Press

Ranger Russet potatoes are harvested Sept. 11 on Kress Farms in American Falls, Idaho. The growers say they've had to cut off digging early at the start of harvest in East Idaho because of hot weather.

Eastern Idaho potato farmers say bruising could be especially problematic as they start their harvest.

Farmers have begun digging before sunrise and closely monitoring the internal temperatures of their tubers during the heat of day, due to unseasonably warm weather.

Most of the region's growers have been shutting down their harvests once their potato pulp temperatures have reached about 65 degrees, as dehydrated spuds are more susceptible to bruising.

"The threat of tuber dehydration is highest when warm conditions result in high evaporative loss from the soil surface, which is exactly the forecast we are facing for the next few weeks," University of Idaho Extension potato researchers Nora Olsen and Mike Thornton recently wrote in harvest recommendations to growers.

The researchers also advise the current crop has extreme variability in maturity — with some vines extremely green due to late plantings this spring and vines in other fields dying prematurely due to extreme heat. Under dead vines, tubers can become too mature and may bruise easily. They may also sustain skin damage and bruising if the vines are too green and are difficult to kill before harvest.

Eastern Idaho growers are generally reporting good tuber quality and yields in line with the five-year average, but down from a large crop last season. Industry leaders are optimistic that reduced potato acreage and yields this season should lead to better fresh-market prices.

Kevin Stanger, an official with the Pingree-based fresh potato packing operation Wada Farms, said on Sept. 11 his company's crews have started digging Russet Norkotahs at 3 a.m. and have been quitting for the day by noon, to make certain their potatoes store well.

"Sizing looks to be a mixed bag — a hodge-podge," Stanger said. "We've had fields that are almost too big of a size and a field or two of small sizes."

Jason Kress, of American Falls, and his workers started digging Ranger Russets at 6 a.m., and he anticipated they'd have to stop for the day by 2 or 3 p.m. Kress said his farm has made sure to pre-water spuds to hydrate them before harvest. He's shipped his early dig spuds directly to Lamb Weston for processing, and they shouldn't need to be stored long. Kress said yields appear to be about average.

Nate Schroeder, of the Pocatello area, planned to start harvesting his chipping potatoes on Sept. 12. Schroeder said his vines are still green and he likely could have boosted his yields by waiting a week, but he was forced to start harvesting to meet the schedule of a buyer's audit. He expects average yields overall, with "huge" Yukon golds and a large set of tubers per plant yielding slightly smaller Ranger Russets. He's heard reports of processors buying a small volume of additional potatoes to bolster their inventories.

Study outlines economic impact of H-2A workers

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

Dan Wheat/Capital Press File

Francisco Trinidad, H-2A-visa foreign guestworker, thins Gala apples at CRO Orchard near Rock Island, Wash., in 2016. Roughly 15,000 H-2A workers are part of some 50,000 seasonal farmworkers employed in Washington state this year.

OLYMPIA — Foreign guestworkers hired by the farm labor association WAFLA harvested about one-seventh of the total production value of Washington apples, pears and cherries in 2015.

A total of 7,779 H-2A-visa foreign guestworkers hired by WAFLA for growers harvested 490,000 tons of fruit valued at $424.3 million in 2015, according to ECONorthwest, a Portland business consulting firm, hired by WAFLA.

The report, released Aug. 23, is based on the 7,779 WAFLA H-2A workers, not the total 11,844 H-2A workers hired in the state that year. The rest were hired directly by several large growers.

The total economic impact of the WAFLA H-2A workers is $619 million when indirect supply chain and induced payroll effects from local production of the fruit are added in, the report says.

The total production value of Washington apples, pears and sweet and tart cherries was $3 billion in 2015, according to the USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service.

"Decision makers in Washington, D.C., are asking us to make the business case for the legal worker program and our study does just that," said Dan Fazio, WAFLA director.

The study demonstrates the economic importance of H-2A workers to the Washington economy in light of labor shortages, he said.

The number of domestic seasonal farmworkers in the state has been flat to declining at about 50,000 annually while statewide H-2A use has increased, he said. Statewide H-2A reached 13,641 in 2016 and is expected to exceed 15,000 this year.

Domestic tree fruit employment has declined 7 percent since 2010, the report says.

The 7,779 WAFLA H-2A workers in 2015 compares with 5,955 in 2014 for 460,000 tons and $270.5 million in production value, the report shows.

"This is a solid report based on reliable sources and using accepted methodology. It shows the economic impact of H-2A workers on the Washington fruit industry and Washington economy," said Desmond O'Rourke, a world apple analyst and retired Washington State University agricultural economist.

Study finds organic farming better at sequestering carbon

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS
Capital Press

A new study shows organic farms store more carbon in the soil and keep it out of the atmosphere longer than conventional farms.

The findings of the study by Northeastern University's National Soil Project and The Organic Center suggest organic farming could help reduce one of the causes of climate change.

Eighty percent of the Earth's terrestrial carbon is stored in soils, and human management practices can deplete the soil's carbon stores by releasing it into the atmosphere. Agriculture in particular has been linked to large losses of soil carbon worldwide, the researchers said.

While other studies have found that soils from organic farms have more soil organic carbon, little research has been done on the amount of total soil organic carbon found in the form of stable humic substances, the researchers said.

"This study is truly groundbreaking," said Jessica Shade, director of science programs at The Organic Center.

"We don't just look at total soil carbon but also components of soil that have stable pools of carbon — humic substances — which gives us a much more accurate and precise view of the stable, long-term storage of carbon in the soil," she said.

Total soil organic matter is not necessarily an accurate proxy for understanding long-term, carbon-storage ability in the soil. The study is important because it quantifies the molecules important for long-term carbon storage in soils, the researchers said.

Lee Juillerat/For the Capital Press

Ron Barnes, left, and Tracey Liskey check out geothermally heated ponds used for raising tilapia.

Hot water holds many opportunities for S. Oregon farms

By LEE JUILLERAT
For the Capital Press

KLAMATH FALLS, Ore. — No matter the season, the fish are always jumping.

That's because Ron Barnes and Tracey Liskey are tossing handfuls of fish food into one of their several fish ponds where they're raising 2-pound tilapia that are live-trucked to fish markets in Seattle and San Francisco. Some remains local, often sold to Klamath Basin residents who especially enjoy the tasty, white fish.

For the past six-plus years Barnes, with Liskey's help, has been experimenting with the best ways of speedily raising tilapias from tiny hatchlings until they're large enough to be fresh-shipped to commercial markets. Before the year is out, Barnes said he expects his business, Gone Fishing, will ship about 50,000 pounds.

"We're starting small, but deliberately so," Barnes said, noting a commercial tilapia farm in Northern California's Modoc County ships up to 20,000 pounds a week. His goal is raising 2-pound tilapias, admitting, "It was difficult to raise them to that size. We've overcome that."

"We work together and get things done," said Liskey. "I can fix things. I'm the mechanic, the engineer."

He and Barnes believe the years of experimenting with feed, water temperatures and other variables have paid off. Barnes said his 80-acre operation south of Klamath Falls and adjacent to Liskey Farms, is "extremely efficient. My water use is a tiny, tiny fraction of what most fish farmers use," noting the tilapias reach market size in about 90 days.

"There was a learning curve learning how to grow them to size," agrees Liskey. "It's kind of like raising a beef cow to a size in the shortest amount of time."

Liskey makes the cattle reference because he manages the family's 1,500-acre ranch, which is 99 percent leased to others. At age 63, he calls himself semi-retired — "But I haven't seen the 'retired' part yet" — because he remains active in many of the ranch's day-to-day operations.

He said ranch operations are equally divided among cattle, hay and grain. A smaller area includes geothermal-reliant businesses that which have drawn his interest. Because of plentiful supplies of geothermal water — tests indicate flows of 5,000 gallons of 195- to 199-degree water a minute — he sees fish farming as one arm of a potentially broader operation.

"My main goal here is trying to develop a geothermal park ... to get something in here to make agriculture more productive," Liskey said.

He envisions "cascading uses," first using the extremely hot water to generate power. While that hasn't yet happened, Liskey said he continues to work with power companies. Less hot, re-circulated geothermal water is already being used for three commercial greenhouses while the third tier of cooler, 84-degree "tail water" is used for raising tilapia, which require warm water.

Barnes breeds his own tilapia because, "When you do your own breeding you don't inherit somebody else's problems," such as various diseases. While some believe commercially raised fish aren't as healthy as wild fish, Barnes said the geothermal water negates the need for chemicals, insisting, "If it's done correctly it's better," noting wild fish are often subject to fouled waters.

While tilapia is their current endeavor, Liskey and Barnes believe the Gone Fishing ponds could be expanded to raise other fish, including shrimp, catfish and sturgeon.

"Oregon has a lot of possibilities in the aqua industry and it's just being done," insists Barnes.

While Barnes focuses on tilapia, Liskey also monitors other geothermally related operations, including a trio of 200-foot greenhouses operated the last several years by Rick Walsh of Fresh Green. Certified organic produce — micro-greens, tomatoes, squash and more — grown in the greenhouses is sold regionally, with some going to Whole Foods.

Another adjacent geothermally heated section is used to grow medical marijuana. Medical and recreational marijuana is legal to grow and sell in Oregon, but recreational marijuana is not legal in some counties, including Klamath County.

Although Liskey voted against legalizing recreational marijuana, he believes the county should rescind the ban because, "We're letting everybody else grow it and saturate the market. Let us grow it, too."