

Harvest festival will take place a second time on Oct. 21

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two-week potato harvest break, which also provides vital income for the families of many students who work for the growers.

"Potato harvest is important because it's so timely, and if you don't get it done within that time period, you could have a hard frost and you can't store them," Kress said. "It's a whole community effort because there are so many jobs that aren't highly technical that people can do that aren't well trained."

At Kress' food truck, crop consultants and neighbors often drop by for a meal and friendly conversation, and workers constantly stop by to thank the couple in person.

"We've got a dedicated staff, and it's sort of a thank-you everyday," Kress said as he stirred spaghetti sauce. "I've never been a believer that you're above any job."

Spud hunt

Idaho farmers planted 325,000 of the 1.037 million U.S. potato acres raised in 2016, and the state's growers harvested nearly 14 billion pounds of tubers, according to recent USDA estimates.

To put the numbers in perspective, Idaho Potato Commission President and CEO Frank Muir explained the state's collective pile would cover a football field nearly a mile high with spuds. Muir said he wasn't surprised when a firm conducting a survey for the Idaho Department of Tourism found Americans overwhelmingly associated the word "potatoes" with Idaho.

"Idaho is known for potatoes more than any other state is known for anything else," Muir said.

To celebrate the completion of the state's monumental potato harvest, Boyd Foster, of Ririe, and other growers organized a community celebration last fall in Idaho Falls. The public came for food and entertainment, and farmworkers and their families got free admission. The festival will take place a second time on Oct. 21.

Foster also hosts a popular



Miss Russet, Katelyn Elizondo, hands out baked potatoes during Idaho Spud Day in Shelley.



Garth Van Orden helps students from the Pocatello Community Charter School glean potatoes from his fields in Fort Hall, Idaho. The students donated the spuds to the local food bank.

community harvest tradition on his farm. Each fall, he digs 6 acres of Russet Burbanks from the center of a field, leaving potatoes on the surface. At 10 a.m. he gives the signal for a crowd that averages more than 400 to begin gleaning spuds. Some fill pickup trucks with potato boxes, which they deliver to friends in need. The event resembles a big Easter egg hunt.

"There's nothing left in the field," Foster said. "They do an excellent job of cleaning up."

In return, many of his guests bring homemade goodies, such as bread, rolls and jam.

For two years, Foster sought to thank his community for its support by parking a truck filled with potatoes at a school or business parking lot with a "free potatoes" sign.

He had few takers until nine years ago, when he invited the public to come to his fields and pick out their own spuds.

Foster believes people are more comfortable working for their food. Many elderly residents come with old-fashioned potato baskets, sharing stories with their grandchildren about helping farmers harvest potatoes by hand before the advent of modern equipment.

"It's in our DNA to harvest," Foster said. "I think that's why it's enjoyed."

School tradition

At the Pocatello Community School, first- and second-graders spend an entire year studying every subject with a potato-centric focus.

For example, they learn the life cycle of a potato plant in biology class and how pota-

atoes impact Idaho's economy in their local civics class.

The school's curriculum also includes a community-service component. Teacher Whitney Griggs explained her classes glean potatoes from a different farm field each fall and donate the bags they fill to the local food bank. Finding a willing farmer has never been a problem.

"We try to mix it up because a lot of different farmers are willing to give and participate in our service project," Griggs said.

This fall, grower Garth Van Orden invited the classes to glean one of his spud fields on the Fort Hall Indian Reservation. Van Orden's staff left a row of potatoes in the field to expedite gleaning, an activity that's gotten tougher as harvesting equipment has become more efficient.

"If we're doing our job right, it's slim pickings," Van Orden said.

Van Orden also gave each child a Spuddy Buddy doll featuring the IPC's mascot.

"They take a pretty minuscule amount of potatoes," Van Orden said. "What isn't minuscule is how wonderful it is to see all of these kids out here and the energy and excitement that they bring."

For other Eastern Idaho growers, such as Merrill Haney in Shelley, local high school



Potatoes are harvested at Kress Farms in American Falls, Idaho.

students fill a critical need during potato harvest. Some of the smaller school districts in the region schedule a two-week potato harvest break, providing an opportunity for students to work harvest.

"We would have a very difficult time harvesting this crop without this assistance," said Haney, who hires about six high school students each fall. "It's hard to find enough labor supply in the area."

When the harvest break ends, Haney said most students still come after school to help. He's employed several low-income students who have used their earnings stay afloat financially, or gone on to college.

"I think (harvest) is a time to pay back both directions and help these farms help the schools with their tax dollars," Haney said.

Haney's grown children also return home from as far away as Puerto Rico to help with harvest.

Crowning a queen

When she was a little girl, Katelyn Elizondo used to host make-believe Miss Russet pageants with her Barbie dolls.

This fall, Elizondo got to live her childhood fantasy, when she won the coveted Miss Russet crown. The pageant is a tradition dating back generations at Shelley High School, where the mascot is also a Russet potato.

Elizondo played the piano as her talent for the pageant, and her service project will involve organizing visits to the local assisted living center.

"This is something I've dreamed of my whole life," Elizondo said.

Miss Russet is a perennial guest of honor at Idaho Spud Day, a "gala celebration of the Idaho potato" hosted on Sept. 16 by the small town.

Basic American Foods donated thousands of baked potatoes that were given away to the crowd. Families competed in a tug-of-war, with a pit of mashed potatoes at the center. Les Brinkley, a former potato warehouse worker who is now a school counselor, served as the announcer during the world championship potato picking contest — a Shelley tradition that dates back to the early 1900s, with cash prizes of up to \$100 awarded to victors.

"It's the only spud picking contest that I know of, so that makes it a world championship," Brinkley explained.

During the Spud Day Parade, Kevin Searle, with the local fresh potato shipping facility GPOD of Idaho, threw potato peelers from a potato truck to crowds gathered along the route. Searle said GPOD often supports local school teams and clubs by furnishing them with potatoes to sell as fundraisers.

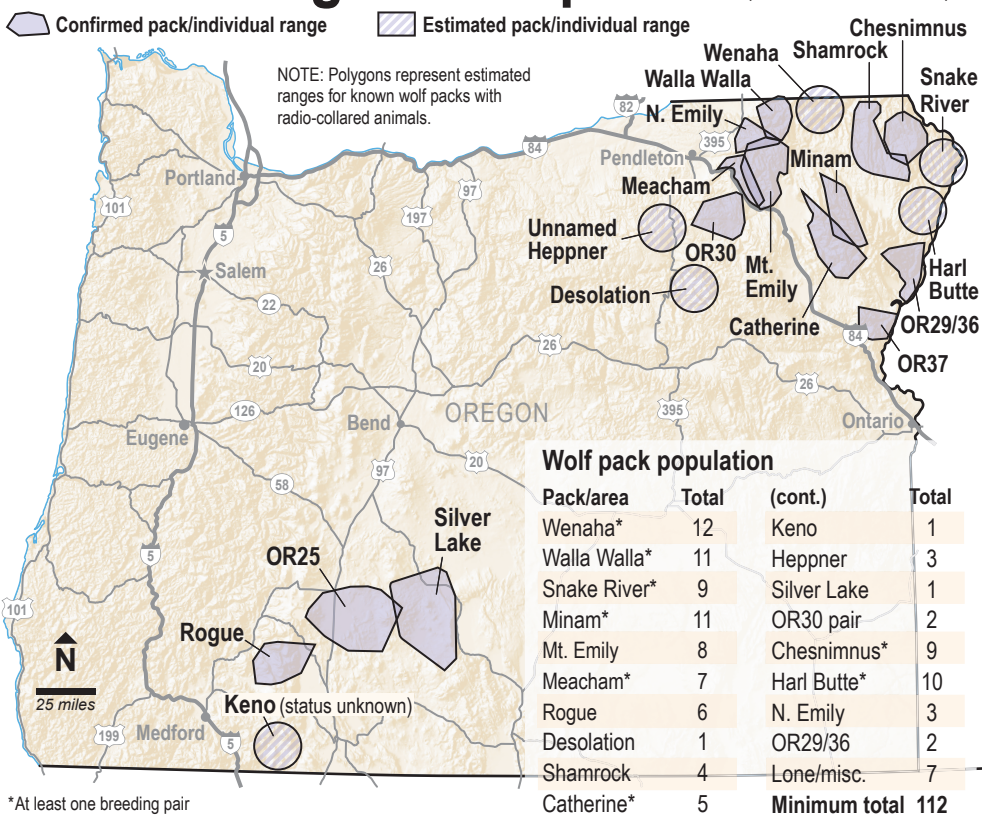
"There are many family farms in this area, and they have grandfathers and great-grandfathers that were in the potato business," Searle said.

Watching the parade with her children from the tailgate of her car, rural Shelley resident Rebecca Fielding explained most people in the community have some connection to the potato industry or potato harvest.

"We have a feed lot where we do corn and wheat and hay, but then we also go and help the uncles with their harvest of potatoes," she said. "All of the Fielding grandkids and cousins help, and they even fly some in from Missouri to help with harvest, and it's the same way with the community. Everybody just flocks to their farms and everybody helps get the harvest done."

Known Oregon wolf packs

(As of Dec. 31, 2016)



Source: Oregon Dept. of Fish and Wildlife

Alan Kenagal/Capital Press

Harl Butte Pack is thought to consist of six adults and three wolves born this past spring

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by the pack since July 2016. At the time, ODFW said it hoped its "incremental" response would work — and for six weeks there were no confirmed attacks, called depredations.

But ODFW confirmed attacks on private land Sept. 29 and Oct. 1 in which one calf was mostly consumed and another was badly bitten. Non-lethal deterrence methods haven't worked, said Roblyn Brown, acting wolf program coordinator for ODFW.

"Grazing season is not over and these cattle will be on public land until Oct. 31 and private land even later depending on the weather," Brown said in a prepared statement.

"As wildlife managers, we are responsible for balancing the conservation of wolves on the landscape with our obligation to manage wolves so that damage to livestock is limited. We need to take further action with this pack," Brown said.

The Harl Butte Pack is thought to consist of six

adults and three wolves born this past spring. The younger wolves are estimated to be 50 to 60 pounds by now; adult wolves range between 70 to 115 pounds.

In a related development, ODFW said the lethal take authorization against the Meacham Pack, in neighboring Umatilla County, has expired. One wolf was shot after ODFW authorized killing two wolves. The department initially said the wolf killed was a non-breeding female, but examination showed it had bred this year.

Ramaswamy: 'Existential threat' of nutritional insecurity is occurring today

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Perdue and even the White House, they're putting their money where their mouth is when it comes to farmers and livestock producers."

For example, the USDA budget was protected, Ramaswamy said.

NIFA's request for the 2017 fiscal year budget called for doubling funding for the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative competitive grants for food and agriculture, from \$350 million to \$700 million, he said.

The Support of Agricultural Research group (SOAR) is pushing for a doubling of funding for experiment stations, extension, forestry programs and for the USDA Agricultural Research Service, Ramaswamy said.

Ramaswamy spoke on innovations for food systems in the 21st Century.

He emphasized to researchers in the audience the need to ensure farmers are profitable, which he said is a priority for NIFA.

"All the greatest inventions and discoveries (researchers) are making that we support means nothing at all if that knowledge is not being put to practical effort by our farmers and livestock producers," he said. "Those producers are trying to make sure you and I can enjoy the fruit of their labor."

NIFA aims to reduce the ecological footprint of food and agriculture, Ramaswamy said, including \$120 billion and 1 quadrillion — a 1 followed by 15 zeroes — liters of water lost each year due to food waste and loss. NIFA hopes to find ways to reduce those losses by half.

A third to half of all food is lost to insects and pathogens before reaching the dinner table in developing countries, and at the dinner table in the developed world, he said. He showed pictures of half-finished meals from a recent breakfast with colleagues.

Some "very simple fixes" include a "best by" expiration date instead of a "sell by" date, or shrink wrap that indicates when food has spoiled, Ramaswamy said.

While many often speak of finding a solution by 2050, Ramaswamy said the "existential threat" of nutritional insecurity is occurring today, and must be considered by researchers.

"Tonight, across the globe, just about 800 million people will go to bed hungry," he said. "As a consequence of that hunger, we'll have about 29,000 people globally drop dead for lack of food. In the United States, we can feed the entire world, but yet the USDA Economic Research Service says we've got almost 16 million households in America that are food insecure. Almost 4 million households are seriously food insecure."

What's next for Ramaswamy?

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

MOSCOW, Idaho — Sonny Ramaswamy was appointed by President Barack Obama to a six-year term as director of the National Institute of Food and Agriculture in 2012.

His term is up next year. An additional term is possible, according to NIFA.

What's next for him?

"I don't know," he told the Capital Press after his presentation on innovations in food systems Oct. 6 at the University of Idaho in Moscow. "My heart lies in academia. I'd hope I'd be able to maybe go into academia or maybe a nongovernmental organization. But I don't know yet."

Ramaswamy was dean of the College of Agricultural Sciences at Oregon State University when Obama appointed him. That position is reopening when current Dean Dan Arp retires next June.

Ramaswamy ruled out a return to OSU.

"Been there, done that, how's that?" he said with a laugh.

Asked about possible replacements in his position at NIFA, he said it's by presidential appointment and not his call.

"But if somebody were to ask me, I could point them in the direction of people to call," he said.

He could be reappointed, he said, noting it's President Donald Trump's and U.S. Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue's prerogative to make that decision.

Would he be interested if they ask?

Ramaswamy declined to comment.