

# U.S. potato industry looks to regain overseas market share

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**  
Capital Press

The North American potato industry might have had a bit of an “overreaction” when it reduced acreage at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, according to the marketing organization for the industry.

Harvested acreage was down 2.5% last year to about 914,000 acres, from 937,000 acres harvested in 2019.

Most of the decline was in Washington and Idaho potato acreage as processors reduced production, said John Toasperm, chief marketing officer for Potatoes USA.

“It now appears that demand for frozen (potato products) has recovered faster than they anticipated, so supplies are tight,” Toasperm said.

Washington acreage dropped 6%, from 164,000 in 2019 to 154,000 in 2020.

Idaho acreage decreased 2.8% from 308,000 to 299,500 acres.

However, Oregon acreage increased 4.7%, from nearly



**John Toasperm**

43,000 acres in 2019 to 45,000 acres in 2020.

The U.S. lost some overseas market share because the European

Union has been selling low-priced product, Toasperm said. The EU did not reduce its acreage.

Shipping costs are also a factor, he said.

Last year, the cost of shipping EU potato products was \$829 per metric ton, compared to the cost of shipping U.S. products, \$1,158 per metric ton.

The National Potato Council kept in close contact with the Trump administration, and will continue discussions with the Biden administration, CEO Kam Quarles said.

The council wants to make sure surges in EU fry products don't undercut a “weakened and recovering” domestic market, Quarles said.

Due to the pandemic, the industry lost some gains made in recent years, Toasperm said, but is about even with its position five years ago.

“While we would just as soon not lost those sales, we're not in a terrible position,” Toasperm said.

Frozen potato exports are down 19% in the current marketing year compared to the same time last year. Dehydrated potatoes are down 3% and fresh potatoes are down 3%, for a total decline of 12.5%, Toasperm said.

“That's a lot, I'm not trying to discount it, but it feels like it could have been a lot worse,” Toasperm said.

Pandemic restrictions are likely to last for much of 2021, he said.

Toasperm predicts world economic recovery will be “slow and uneven.”

Competition from the EU and China will be fierce, but demand for U.S. potatoes will fully recover during the 2022 marketing year, Toasperm predicted.

The industry wants to

ensure that the promise of new trade agreements with Mexico, Japan and China results in “durable access” for U.S. potatoes, Quarles said.

Quarles also expects a ruling from Mexico's Supreme Court on access for U.S. fresh potatoes in the first half of 2021.

There is “little daylight” between the outgoing and the incoming administrations on this issue, Quarles said. “That consistent message from the U.S. is a good thing. We intend to keep the pressure on until we get the resolution that is rightfully ours.”

COVID-19 remains the most immediate challenge the potato industry faces today, but it will not be the last crisis, Quarles said.

“Hopefully the actions we took during these past few months will also be applied toward whatever comes at us in the future, with similar productive results,” he said.

Toasperm and Quarles spoke Jan. 27 during the Washington Oregon Potato Conference, held virtually.

# Washington wildfire bill needs money to catch on

By **DON JENKINS**  
Capital Press



**Hilary Franz**

OLYMPIA — Washington Lands Commissioner Hilary Franz said Feb. 11 that she expects lawmakers will tap more than one source of money to fund a two-year, \$125 million plan to reduce the risk of wildfires.

Franz said a handful of candidates have emerged, including a carbon tax, utility tax and an insurance tax. Legislators also could dip into general taxes or borrow money.

“It's likely you're looking at multiple ones,” Franz said in an interview. “My number one job is to get this across the finish line.”

The plan, detailed in House Bill 1168, calls for spending more on hand crews, firefighting equipment and training, educating rural residents and thinning forests.

The bill is meant to prepare to fight wildfires, but not the cover emergency costs that accumulate every wildfire season.

Franz advocates that the Legislature appropriate \$125 million every two years to make catastrophic wildfires less likely.

HB 1168 has received bipartisan support, passing the House Committee on Rural Development, Agriculture and Natural Resources last month.

The legislation, however, has yet to go through budget committees. The bill doesn't propose new taxes.

“Now the hard discussions will start on where the funding comes from,” said Rep. Joel Kretz, R-Okanogan County.

Kretz's district covers north-central and north-east Washington and has been particularly plagued by wildfires.

“If it were up to me, I'd take it all out of the general fund,” he said Thursday. “I think it should be a statewide priority.”

In previous sessions, Franz has proposed a \$5 tax on home and property insurance policies. Insur-

ance companies opposed the tax, which didn't go far in the Legislature.

Franz said taxing insurance policies remains an option.

Electricity can spark wildfires, which can also burn up transmission lines and substations, justifying a utility tax to fund the bill, Franz said.

Democrats also are again considering a carbon tax, a potential source of a large amount of money for government programs.

HB 1168 blames an increase in extremely damaging wildfires on climate change and past fire suppression.

The bill calls for “scientifically informed landscape-level treatments designed to restore forest ecosystem and watershed resilience.”

In deciding which communities to focus on, the Department of Natural Resources may rely on two advisory committees for recommendations, according to HB 1168.

The advisory committees must use “environmental justice or equity focused tools” to identify “highly impacted communities,” as defined in state law, and use that as a factor in their recommendations.

The Department of Health recently scored every census tract to categorize “highly impacted communities.” Scores were based on factors such as education, income, air pollution and race.

Wildfires were not an “environmental disparity” considered in mapping the state.

No part of north-central or northeast Washington, the region hardest hit by wildfires, is rated a highly impacted community.

Kretz said priority should be given to areas that are at the greatest risk from fire and smoke.

# WSU winter wheat breeder previews new varieties

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**  
Capital Press

Washington State University's winter wheat breeder, Arron Carter, recently provided a sneak peek at upcoming new varieties during a presentation for dryland farmers.

New varieties include:

- **Devote** (soft white winter wheat): High-yielding cultivar for low-rainfall areas. Resistant to stripe rust, eyespot foot rot, snow mold and Fusarium crown rot. Good emergence, cold tolerance and end-use quality.

Carter developed Devote after noticing WSU's variety Otto performs well in dry conditions, but doesn't necessarily respond to wetter years.

“Devote is one of those lines that will do great in the worst of conditions but if we get rain, it's going to do great in more favorable conditions as well,” Carter said.

- **Scorpio** (hard red winter wheat): High yield potential in Southern and Eastern Washington. Excellent stripe rust resistance. Tolerance to low pH soils. Very good end-use quality and bread mixing properties, good protein content. Also resistant to Hessian fly.

“We often don't talk about Hessian fly in winter wheat, we usually think of that as our spring wheat problem,” Carter said. But the insect pest can also cause a



Matthew Weaver/Capital Press File

**Washington State University winter wheat breeder Arron Carter offered a preview of the latest varieties coming out of his program.**

yield reduction in winter wheat.

That resistance will come in handy when following winter wheat with spring wheat, as Hessian fly can harbor in the winter wheat stubble, Carter said.

- **Piranha CL+** (soft white winter wheat): High-yielding cultivar broadly adapted to Washington rainfall zones. Resistant to stripe rust, eyespot foot rot and snow mold. Very good cold tolerance and emergence. Very good end-use quality. Excellent tolerance to all applications of Beyond. Better performance in a low-input system than Sockeye CL+.

- **Sockeye CL+** (soft white winter wheat): High-yielding cultivar broadly adapted to Washington and Oregon rainfall zones. Resistant to stripe rust, eyespot foot rot and snow mold. Very good cold tolerance and emergence. Excellent end-use quality. Excellent tolerance to applications of Beyond. Better performance in high-input systems than Piranha CL+.

The CL+ indicates Clearfield wheat varieties. The Clearfield system allows farmers to spray wheat with Beyond herbicide.

# Oregon bill aims to boost homebuilding in Idaho border region

By **BRAD CARLSON**  
Capital Press



**Sen. Lynn Findley**

A bill in the Oregon Legislature would allow some unproductive farmland near the Idaho border to be rezoned for 2-acre residential lots.

The change would allow more houses to be built in that part of Oregon, said Sen. Lynn Findley, R-Vale.

He said Malheur County, Ore., in 2020 issued building permits for 23 homes,

compared to the 153 that neighboring Payette County, Idaho, issued.

About 75% of the workers at the Snake River Correctional Institution in Ontario, Ore., live in Idaho, he said.

Boise-based Intermountain Multiple Listing Service reported that the median

price of a Payette County home in January 2021 was \$305,000, up 27.5% from \$239,175 in January 2020.

Senate Bill 16 would apply Oregon's exclusive farm use zoning law uniquely in the region that borders growing southwest Idaho.

SB 16 would apply only to unproductive farmland.

“It doesn't have to grow a crop,” said Findley, who comes from an agricultural background. “It could grow a house.”

The bill also would protect a neighboring farm's right to continue farming. It aims to “put some more people back in Oregon to live here” without taking farmland out of production, he said.

For example, a producer could sell unfarmable ground and “make some use out of it,” Findley said. “It's almost impossible to do that now.”

The bill allows the conversion of land zoned for exclusive farm use to

rural residential, subject to criteria.

SB 16's text says the bill applies to the established Eastern Oregon Border Economic Development Region. The region encompasses an area from Jamieson south to Adrian and within about 20 miles of the Idaho border.

A county that has established a review board could rezone exclusive farm use ground for development of 2-acre lots for single-family homes.

Land used for farming

in the previous three years would not be eligible. High-value farmland, with soils in the state's top three quality classes, and land that is “viable for reasonably obtaining a profit for a farm use” also could not be rezoned.

Rezoning could not involve more than 200 acres, or force a significant change in practices on surrounding farm or forest lands. It would require a deed restriction that protects neighboring farming, forestry and rangeland practices.

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