



E.J. Harris/EO Media Group File

The impact of hot, dry weather on the Washington and Oregon potato crops will be clear when harvest begins next month.

## Northwest potato farmers ‘clobbered’ by weather, hope for average crop

By MATTHEW WEAVER  
Capital Press

Mark Ward has lowered his expectations for his potatoes this year.

“I’m not happy with the quality,” said Ward, a farmer in Oregon’s Baker County. “I have no idea about the yield yet, but what I see underground does not please me. The heat has definitely affected those potatoes.”

Instead of a bumper crop, he’ll settle for an average crop.

“The good crop went away in June when it was too damn hot,” he said. “It’s Mother Nature — the heat, the drought and the wind. We had three huge factors that just clobbered us.”

The full effect of heat and drought on the region’s potato crop will become clear when farmers begin to harvest in mid-September and October, said Chris Voigt, executive director of the Washington Potato Commission.

“If you were to drive through the countryside, you would see some potato plants that look really good, and some potato plants that look really bad,” he said. “We’re trying to be optimistic about what the future might be, but we know that this is kind of an unusual



Chris Voigt

year, that the heat hit so early and lasted so long.”

Voigt points to the industry’s resilience, and noted many growers still have a month or so left before harvest. An average yield would be about 600 hundredweight per acre, he said.

“There’s still time for us to make a pretty good crop,” he said. “I’m guessing for sure we’ve lost the top end of the yield. I would say probably, best-case scenario at this point, it’s going to be an average yield. Which, compared to everywhere else in the country, is still pretty good.”

Some varieties are more heat-tolerant while others do not handle it very well, Voigt said. This year’s crop of Russet Burbank potatoes, the most widely grown variety in the U.S., “looks like it got hit by a truck,” Voigt said.

Ward is contracted to grow Russet Burbanks for Simplot for french fries and processing.

Under his contract, Ward could get penalized or rejected if the percentage of top quality, No. 1 potatoes is too low.

Potato harvest began in July. Early varieties fared better because the heat didn’t hit until they were ready to harvest anyway, Voigt said.

“It’s the later potatoes we’re worried about,” he said.

Voigt estimates 99% of potato farmers in the Columbia Basin don’t participate in crop insurance.

“Mostly because the premiums are pretty high and it’s rare that they ever pay,” he said. “We generally have really consistent weather and always consistently produce a quality crop and high yields. Growers over the course of the years have said, ‘Why buy insurance? It doesn’t make sense because it costs way too much money and I never collect anything.’ They’re kind of on their own.”

Is this a year crop insurance might have helped?

“Oh, yes,” Voigt said. “Probably.”

Ward, the Oregon farmer, uses crop insurance, but notes growers can only insure for 85% of yield and 85% of price.

“It’s kind of like if you total your car and the insurance company hands you a check, you can’t go buy a car with that check as good as what you just totaled,” he said.

## Onion yield declines expected in SE Oregon, SW Idaho

By BRAD CARLSON  
Capital Press

Onion yields are likely will be down by double-digit percentages in southeastern Oregon and southwestern Idaho as prolonged hot weather has shifted much of the crop from bulk-up to survival mode.

The region produces about 45% of the U.S. crop from September through April. About 24 shippers and six processors operate in the region, where the National Onion Association pegs acreage at about 22,000.

As for yield reductions, “20-40% down from average is what I’m hearing around the area, and mine could be on the higher end of that range,” said Dyke Nagasaka, who farms near Weiser, Idaho.

He said his yield could be down 35%, adding that “onions are smaller and weedier.”

Nagasaka said high temperatures in the mid-90s to above 100 occur on five to seven days during the typical summer, “not for an extended period over the majority of the growing period of the onion.”

Oregon State University Malheur Experiment Station Director Stuart Reitz said cumulative heat units for the crops are running nearly three weeks ahead of the 30-year average.

Onions grow best in temperatures of 50 to 90 degrees, he said. An abundance of days with highs in the 90s and 100s meant plants matured earlier but did not grow as much. And unusually warm nights left them less time in good growing conditions before daytime temperatures soared again.

“A little bit of heat is good and too much heat starts to be bad,” Reitz said.

“Like any other year, we have good-looking fields and fields that are not as great-looking,” Reitz said.

Malheur County Onion Growers Association President Paul Skeen of Nyssa, Ore., said quality looks good, “and what we are going to miss is the larger onions. And when you have less larger onions, you are going to have less yield” by weight.

He said he expects regional yields to be down “as much as 20%, and it could be more.” Supply should still be sufficient to meet clients’ needs.

Onion plants soften at the stem and fall over after they mature and send energy to the bulb below.

“We are getting that earlier than normal because of wind and extra heat units,”



Idaho and Malheur County Onion Growers Southeastern Oregon and southwestern Idaho comprise one of the nation’s largest onion-growing regions.

Skeen said. Bulbs thus did not grow as large.

“By and large, the onions look fairly typical, but there was some pretty heavy wind damage within several fields,” said soil scientist and Western Laboratories owner John Taberna of Parma, Idaho. The heat “physiologically aged” the crop, he said.

Idaho Onion Growers Association Vice President Jarom Jemmett of Parma said his yields probably will be about 15% below the long-term average due to heat and wind.

He said his farm’s bulbs are about the usual size, but there aren’t as many. Wind thinned stands, he said, so the remaining onions had less competition for nutrients.

Taberna said when temperature exceeds 86 a foot above the onion plant, it can’t take in enough water to keep itself cool, as openings in the leaf close to prevent water loss. He and clients are focusing on individual fields rather than their entire crops — optimizing fertilizer applied through drip irrigation to meet daily conditions and needs until maturity, for example.

“We’ve been dealt a tough hand as far as the weather,” he said. “We’ve got to adapt to this year as opposed to the last 15 years of what we have done with our program for that crop.”

Nagasaka said irrigation water at some of his fields was scheduled to be shut off in mid-August or so, at least six weeks early. Though there are onions already “down” and nearing maturity, “it would be nice to have one more irrigation to put on a little more size on some.”

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