

Mexico opens door to full access for fresh U.S. spuds

By BRAD CARLSON
Capital Press

The U.S. has started exporting fresh potatoes into Mexico beyond the 16.15-mile border zone that previously marked their limit.

Full-country access has been an issue for some 25 years. Mexican regulators granted it, but an industry group said the agency lacked authority to do so. The Mexican Supreme Court just over a year ago rejected that argument and granted full access.

The U.S. and Mexico struck an agreement in late 2021. Mexican regulators last month made final U.S. site visits.

The National Potato Council said Mexico in 2021 was the second-largest market for U.S. fresh potato exports. Value was about \$60 million last year and has the potential to grow to \$250 million annually in five years if full access continues.

"This is an important moment for the U.S. potato industry and our partners in the federal government who have fought for decades to restore access to this vital market," council President Jared Balcom, a Washington grower, said in a release. "But we know the work is not over if we are to keep the border open."

"These are the first shipments that are free to move anywhere in the country, so this is an important first step," council CEO Kam Quarles told Capital Press.

"We recognize, though, that this will likely generate substantial push-back from the Mexican potato industry," he said. The council will work closely with USDA to ensure a fair trading relationship continues.

Quarles said the new shipments are coming late in the season when there



Getty Images

Fresh U.S. potatoes are being shipped all over Mexico under a new agreement.

are fewer potatoes to export.

"The real test is going to come toward the end of 2022 and the beginning of 2023, when growing volumes of exports are entering Mexico and the Mexican potato industry is likely to be pushing back against that competition," he said.

"This will be a multi-year process to keep the market open and to grow these valuable markets," Quarles said May 12. "Today is a good day and a great first step."

Ross Johnson, Idaho Potato Commission international marketing director, said the state's shippers were "first across" because of work done beforehand.

"We have stayed in touch with buyers over the years, and that has developed some strong relationships," he said. Idaho thus could participate promptly in the expanded market even though some states offer better pricing.

Idaho exports about 20% of its potatoes. Distance from ports is a limiting factor. Johnson said total exports

could increase over time due to the expanded opportunity in Mexico.

But proper execution is the immediate priority, he said.

"Restrictions are pretty tight, so our shippers are making sure they are maintaining quality and are consistent so they don't have any red flags come up at the border crossing," Johnson said.

USDA said one of the benefits of full-country access is that Mexico can get more safe, high-quality U.S. fresh potatoes.

Zak Miller, Idaho Farm Bureau Federation CEO, said starting to ship U.S. fresh potatoes throughout Mexico addresses one of the biggest roadblocks the industry has faced, and also means "Mexico has access to the best potatoes in the world."

"This is truly a historic event, and one we're celebrating," said John Toasperm, Potatoes USA chief marketing officer. "But we also must be very mindful of the previous issues and stay vigilant to permanently keep the market open."

Retail potato sales mixed in quarter

By BRAD CARLSON
Capital Press

Retail potato sales in the quarter ending in March increased by 7.2% in value but dropped by 5% by weight compared to last year, reflecting higher prices and a trend toward smaller consumer packages, Potatoes USA reported.

Volume sales were below those of 2020, when panic buying began in response to COVID-19, but were higher than in 2019, the national marketing group said.

Prices increased by 12.8% overall from the first three months of last year, averaging \$2.02 per pound, according to Resources Inc. data.

Kayla Dome, Potatoes USA global manager for retail programs, said the move to smaller package sizes reflects some easing of COVID-19 concerns as people shop more frequently and buy less bulk packages.

Retail potato sales see "a return to what we were seeing before the pandemic," she said.

Dome said chips are again popular in smaller bags for snacks and potatoes in 1- and 2-pound bags comprise a higher percentage of store sales volume compared to 2019.

Yellow potato sales are increasing, as they were in 2019.

Chip sales increased by 11.9% in value and declined 0.6% in volume even as unit sales rose by 0.2% — show-



Kayla Dome

ing a reduction in package sizes. Unit sales represent the number of packages sold.

Frozen potatoes dropped in dollar, volume and unit sales.

Canned potatoes increased in dollar, volume and unit sales.

Dome said frozen sales remain higher than in 2019. The year-to-year drop for the January-March quarter could partly reflect supply factors.

She said the gain in canned potato sales may be a result of retailers carrying more of the product. And, she said, people who stocked up earlier may be "running low in their pantries."

Fresh potato sales posted an increase in dollar sales and a decline in volume and unit sales. Only packages sized between 1 and 2 pounds increased in dollar, volume and unit sales. Five-pound packages, which comprise 45% of total volume sales, increased by 5.9% in dollars and dropped in volume by 1.2%.

Yellow and white potatoes were the fresh category's only types to post sales gains in dollars and volume. Retail sale of Russets — 57% of fresh volume — had volume sales drop by 10.2% as dollar sales rose by 1.5%.

The highest fresh price increases were 15.7% for purple potatoes and 13% for Russets, Potatoes USA reported.



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TWIN FALLS, Idaho — Idaho FFA members have a new team of state officers, who were announced at the end of the organization's annual convention last month.

After the FFA members boarded buses for home on a four-day high of FFA exuberance, Capital Press sat down with the new officers to get their reaction.

Halee Bohman, the new state president, is a senior at Troy High School and president of the Troy FFA chapter. She plans to attend the University of Idaho to major in agricultural business and political science.

"I'm overwhelmed with emotion for sure and humbled to be given this opportunity among some of my closest friends," she said.

The new officers formed a close bond as candidates, she said.

Elizbeth Shaw, the new state vice president, is a senior at Parma High School, vice president of the Parma FFA chapter and president of the Western Idaho FFA District. She plans to attend the University of Idaho to major in elementary education and horticulture/urban agriculture.

"I'm still in shock. I just can't believe it actually came true," she said of her successful run for office.

She didn't always have the confidence to put herself out there, but her FFA adviser saw leadership qualities and pushed her to be the best version of herself, she said.

In her role as a state officer, she wants to "inspire and motivate and inform Idaho FFA of the importance of agriculture," she said.

State Secretary KaLisi Griggs is a senior at Sugar-Salem High School and president of the Sugar-Salem FFA chapter. She plans to take a year off from school to focus on being a state officer and then enter a physician's assistant program at Weber State University.

"I'm excited. It kind of seems surreal, really fun but a roller coaster of emotion," she said.

Her goal is to "reach out to chapters that are not as successful and struggling with membership and just let them know they can make a difference in FFA, even in agriculture," she said.

State Treasurer Mackenzie Malson is a senior at Fruitland High School and vice president of the Fruitland FFA chapter. She plans to attend the University of Idaho to major in agricultural economics with the hope of pursuing a law degree.

"This week has been the most emotional week of my life. It's been so much fun, and it hasn't quite sunk in yet," she said.

State Reporter Ember Mendoza is a senior at Rigby High School and is president of the Rigby FFA chapter. She plans to attend the College of Eastern Idaho to become a certified Emergency Medical Technician.

"I'm excited and (in a state of) emotional overload. It's going to be a great year," she said.

State Sentinel Korby Lindsey is a senior and is a student adviser for the Rigby FFA chapter. He plans to take a year off from school to focus on being a state officer. After that, he plans to attend Utah State University to become an agriculture teacher.

"I wasn't expecting to make the first cut," he said of the candidate process.

He had planned on running for state office since freshmen year, and "it's good to know all my hard work paid off," he said.

His goal is "to be that inspiration to kids like past officers. My main goal is to inspire the next generation of agriculture," he said.



Front row, from left, are Halee Bohman, president; and Mackenzie Malson, treasurer. Back row, from left, are KaLisi Griggs, secretary; Korby Lindsey, sentinel; Ember Mendoza, reporter; and Elizbeth Shaw, vice president;

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