

Heat, smoke not expected to diminish potato harvest

Early season yields looking about average

By **GEORGE PLAVERN**
EO Media Group

Months of intense heat and smoky skies are not expected to diminish Oregon’s potato crop, with farmers across the state predicting average to above-average yields heading into the bulk of harvest.

Bill Brewer, CEO of the Oregon Potato Commission, said the overall impact of wildfire smoke is yet to be determined in spuds, but he has not heard of any major setbacks or problems with quality.

Hot weather can be hard on certain potato varieties, such as Russet Burbank — the gold standard for french fries — though in general, Brewer said he anticipates a roughly average harvest statewide and good quality potatoes.

“The higher heat during the summertime has been a bit of an issue, only on select varieties,” Brewer said. “So far, I have not heard any other negatives about other growing conditions.”

About 70 percent of Oregon potatoes are grown in the Columbia Basin around Hermiston and Boardman. Potatoes ranked as the seventh-most valuable agricultural commodity in the state in 2017, raking in \$176.9 million.

Marty Myers, general manager of Threemile Canyon Farms near Boardman, said the growing season got off to a good start with warm weather early in the spring. Crews began harvesting early season potatoes on July 10, and Myers said yields have generally been very good.

Threemile Canyon Farms



Capital Press File

Potato harvest is underway across Oregon. Growers report the crop is in good shape despite a hot summer and smoke from wildfires.

grows 9,000 acres of mostly conventional and some organic russets, all for local food processors. Myers said it is still too early to tell if triple-digit heat and smoke in July and August has impacted full season potatoes. Harvest just began Sept. 12, and will likely run through Oct. 20-25.

“Early season was very warm, and things looked pretty good,” Myers said. “Then summer heat comes in like it does every year and knocks us back a little bit. ... We always know it’s going to get hot over the summer, and at periods we’re going to have smoke.”

Brewer said he believes the smoke does have an effect on potato production, blocking sunlight needed by the plants and possibly altering taste, but more research is needed to back up anecdotal evidence.

Dan Chin, who runs Chin Family Farms Organic outside Merrill in the Klamath Basin, said they were socked in by smoke from wildfires raging in southern Oregon and northern California for a solid month and a half.

“A lot of times, you couldn’t see more than a couple of miles, or a mile,” Chin said. “It was pretty intense.”

However, Chin theorizes the smoke actually helped his potatoes this year by lowering the heat and causing the plants to put more energy into the tubers. He started harvesting Sept. 12, and said both size and quality are looking good.

“Just looking at it last year and this year, we’re seeing a little trend that the smoke didn’t really hurt our sizing and yield as much as we thought it might,” Chin said. “As far as our crop is concerned, we’re pretty happy with it.”

That being said, Chin said they definitely do not want smoke every year, which makes it harder for employees to work outside.

Mark Ward, chairman of the Oregon Potato Commission, farms 160 acres of potatoes on the north edge of Baker City. He is targeting Sept. 24 to begin harvest, and like others, expects to see solid yields.

Ward exclusively supplies potatoes to Simplot for making french fries. He said this summer’s heat, including five days of triple-digit temperatures, may increase the likelihood of sugar ends, a defect in potatoes that results in unappealing brown ends.

Judge finds Montwheeler unfit to stand trial in murders

VALE (AP) — A judge in Oregon has halted a double murder trial for a man charged with kidnapping and killing his ex-wife after ruling that the defendant is mentally unfit to stand trial.

Malheur County Circuit Judge Tom Ryan made the determination Tuesday and ordered Anthony Montwheeler, of Nampa, Idaho, transferred to the Oregon State Hospital for treatment, *The (Ontario) Argus Observer* reported.

It’s the latest in a string of hospitalizations for mental health for Montwheeler, 49, who was found guilty except for insanity in 1996 of kidnapping his first wife and son.

Montwheeler spent most of the next two decades in mental health treatment instead of in prison, but was released in 2016 after telling a review board he faked mental illness in the 1990s because going to the state hospital and, later, outpatient treatment was better than the prison term he would have

otherwise received.

Prosecutors say three weeks after his release, in January 2017, he kidnapped and killed his ex-wife Anita Harmon and then crashed his car during a police pursuit, killing 38-year-old David Bates. Montwheeler has pleaded not guilty to aggravated murder, murder, kidnapping and assault in the current case.

He could face the death penalty if the trial eventually proceeds and he is convicted. A hearing to review his mental health status is set for Jan. 2.

The latest incident unfolded in Weiser, Idaho, where Harmon’s car was found abandoned in the middle of the road. Later, across the state line in Ontario, Oregon, a convenience store clerk reported that a woman in a pickup had been kidnapped and was being stabbed.

During the ensuing police chase, Montwheeler’s Dodge pickup crossed a centerline and collided with an

SUV, killing Bates.

Bates’ wife has sued the state over her husband’s death, alleging Montwheeler should not have been free.

A month earlier, Montwheeler told the review board he faked mental illness in the 1990s because going to the state hospital and, later, outpatient treatment was better than the prison term he would have otherwise received.

“And all I got to do is make myself sound like I’m crazy. And that’s the route I took,” Montwheeler testified, according to the *Malheur Enterprise*, which obtained a recording of the December 2016 hearing and engaged in a long legal battle with the Oregon Psychiatric Security Review Board over release of Montwheeler’s records.

Montwheeler’s attorney, David Falls, has asked the judge to keep reports on Montwheeler’s mental health evaluations confidential.

Stanfield schools closed for power failure

Stanfield School District sent its students home at Wednesday morning due to a power failure.

According to school superintendent Beth Burton, there was a power outage in Stanfield on Tuesday night, and when staff came to school Wednesday morning there was no power in some areas and low power in others.

Burton said Pacific Power planned to cut power and fix the line, which would interfere with the school’s lights, phones and internet. Students

were served lunch at 10:30 a.m., and buses started running at 11:15 a.m. to take students home.

Burton said the decision to close school was made for student and staff safety.

She said the power company estimated they would have the issue resolved by late afternoon, and the district still held a community meeting to discuss an upcoming bond at 6 p.m. at the Stanfield Secondary School cafeteria, which included a tour of the facilities.

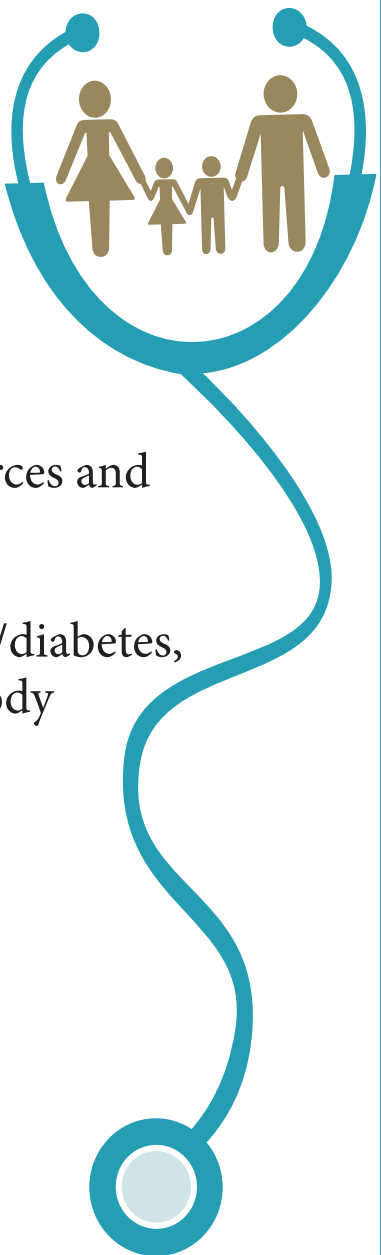
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