

Potato growers face challenges

Combination of price cut and rising production costs puts premium on quality, yields from 2021 crop

By **JAYSON JACOBY**
Baker City Herald

A year ago, Mark Ward was worried about the potato crop he was preparing to plant in the Baker Valley fields his family has farmed for many decades.

Today he's somewhat more confident.

And not a little relieved that the COVID-19 pandemic didn't precipitate the economic disaster that seemed plausible, even probable, in March and April of 2020.

Still and all, Ward doesn't expect the ups and downs to level out.

"Roller coaster ride is how I would describe the last 12 months," Ward said in late March 2021.

The stomach-churning drop started just about a year ago.

With the nation — indeed, the world — reeling from the unexpected arrival of the new virus, restaurants either closed or offered takeout meals only.

Sporting events were canceled.

People stopped traveling, which meant the drive-thru lanes of fast-food restaurants, at least for a while, weren't nearly as congested as usual.

With nobody watching games from the bleachers, and few if any people sitting at tables and booths in restaurants, the demand for French fries and other processed potato products plummeted.

"In March and April there was a big dip," said Ward, who is the chairman of the Oregon Potato Commission.

The uncertain and unprecedented situation provoked anxiety



Ward Ranches potatoes are being conveyed along the sorting table in front of Crystal Bork, right, Sandy Thom- as, center, and Heather Carter during a previous year's harvest.

S. John Collins/Baker City Herald, File

among potato farmers, he said. They wondered not only whether there would be a market for the potatoes they had just planted or were preparing to plant — the Ward family sows its fields at the start of May — but they worried too about potatoes in storage.

"When restaurants closed, processors made some drastic cuts," Ward said.

In some places, although not in Baker Valley, farmers had to plow under potatoes they had planted because potato processors severely

cut production, Ward said.

Just a few growers in the Columbia Basin had to take that unusual step and sow a different crop in place of the recently planted potatoes, said Dale Lathim, executive director of Potato Growers of Washington.

Because the growing season is much longer in the Columbia Basin than in Baker Valley — the latter being more than 2,000 feet higher in elevation — potato farmers in the Basin plant their crop in late February or early March,

Lathim said.

That meant they had seed potatoes in the ground when the pandemic started and processors slashed their production volume by about 20%, he said.

Some affected growers chose to raise the 2020 potato crop without a contract and hope they could sell the spuds on the open market, Lathim said.

A few plowed under the potatoes and planted other crops.

Fortunately, Lathim said, the farmers who chose the latter,

unpalatable option, although they didn't make nearly as much as they would have from potatoes, did make a small profit from their hastily planted crops rather than taking a potential loss of hundreds of dollars per acre.

RETAIL MARKET, FAST-FOOD RESTAURANTS RECOVER RAPIDLY

The precipitous drop in demand for frozen potatoes prompted by the pandemic was relatively brief.

Ward said the market "recovered nicely" by June 2020, driven in part by demand for potatoes, both fresh spuds and frozen processed products such as fries, at grocery stores.

"People were eating at home, relearning to cook at home," he said. "That was definitely a bright spot. There was a tremendous increase in sales at grocery stores."

Ward said he was gratified at how rapidly the industry adjusted from supplying potatoes to the restaurant and food service industry, which buy in larger quantities, to the different demands of the retail sector.

"Kudos to everyone in the industry," Ward said. "They got products onto the shelves at the retail level."

The "panic-buying" that was a symbol of the early days of the pandemic — although toilet paper, not potatoes, was the most infamous of the hoarded products — helped too, Ward said.

"I talked to people who, for about two weeks, couldn't find a potato in the grocery store," he said.

Lathim said he wasn't surprised that grocery sales of potatoes skyrocketed after restaurants closed or were severely limited.

"With the restaurant option taken off the table, so to speak, French fries and other convenience foods flew off the shelf," he said.

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