

Potato:

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“That seven percent swing is a hit growers have not experienced before,” he said. “Most of the growers are in a position where they can survive this kind of hit for a year, maybe two. But it’s certainly not a sustainable level.”

The combination of lower prices and higher farming costs means farmers, even more than usual, will need to manage their crops to ensure the quality and yields are as high as possible, Lathim said.

“Everybody’s going to be hyper-vigilant to maximize both yields and quality,” he said.

That means, for instance, that growers have planted potatoes only on the higher-quality ground, rather than taking a risk on sowing less-productive fields, Lathim said.

Ward said the turmoil in the potato market, and in the economy overall, has slowed the normal process of planning for the 2021 crop.

In the last week of March he said it was possible that his family will plant its 2021

potatoes with a commitment from buyers for volume, but without a signed contract for a specific number of acres.

If that proves out, it will be just the third time that has happened for the Wards in more than 30 years, he said.

CHANGES IN WASHINGTON, D.C.

But even with contracts in place, uncertainties will remain.

Ward said the change from the Trump to the Biden administration raises questions, most notably with international trade agreements.

“Trade is vital to Oregon potatoes,” he said. “Sixty-five percent of the state’s potatoes are exported.”

Ward said he will be closely following the new administration’s approach to trade with China, a massive market that Oregon potato growers have not been able to access.

There’s also an unsettled lawsuit with Mexico regarding the ability of American farmers to sell fresh potatoes in that country.

The international market news is not wholly negative, though.

“Japan is a bright spot,” Ward said. “That’s our number one trading partner. Our exports are doing quite well there.”

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