

Potatoes remain king of county's agriculture scene

160-acre tract now just 'small potatoes'

If it were located nearly anywhere else in the world, Paul Taylor's 160-acre North Lexington operation would be considered large.

But in Morrow County, where spud is king of the agricultural economy, Taylor's spread is just small potatoes.

Depending on whose statistics you read, Morrow County either ranks second, third or fourth among the nation's top potato producing counties. It is definitely number one in Oregon. Yields in Morrow average nearly twice the tonnage per acre produced in Idaho, which somehow enjoys a national reputation for outstanding potato production.

Potato sales in Morrow County last year totaled nearly \$31 million, and could do as well this year. With Morrow County potato acreage now totaling about 25,000, spuds continue to outrate wheat as the county's top cash crop.

But in Morrow County, it is a crop that is dominated by corporate giants.

"As far as I know, I'm the smallest grower in the county," said Taylor, during a pause last week from harvesting his stand of Russets.

"Back in the Columbia Basin Project where I used to live, this would be a pretty good sized operation."

But Taylor insists that he doesn't really mind competing with big-time agribusiness for the potato dollar.

"If it weren't for the corporations, we wouldn't have the processing plants," said Taylor, noting that the french fry processors and potato flaking plants in Boardman and Hermiston provide a broader and more stable market for the area growers. The processing operations in the Port of Morrow at Boardman complex also give jobs to some 700 workers.

The corporate farms were also responsible for pioneering irrigation development in north Morrow, where almost 100 per cent of the county's potatoes are grown.

When I came here in 1969," recalled Morrow County Extension Agent Harold Kerr, "there were only four circles in operation. Now, there are nearly 600." The first Morrow potato crop of any significance, Kerr noted, was produced in 1970.

Since the birth of the Morrow County potato industry in 1970, the semiarid north Morrow landscape has changed dramatically. The Simtag company has devoted some 9,000 acres of former desert land to potatoes, and boasts that it is the nation's single largest spud grower with the world's largest potato warehouse, capable of storing 80,000 tons.

Simtag operates 207 center pivot irrigation lines, each capable of sprinkling about 125 acres. Sabre farms boasts 127 circles, and Eastern Oregon Farming Co. is equipped

with 89.

The sandy desert soil, mated with adequate water and a 200-day growing season, makes north Morrow a virtual Garden of Eden for potato production.

But potatoes are also one of the most unstable of all agricultural commodities in terms of price fluctuation.

"Potatoes have made a lot of people, but they've broke twice as many" said Taylor.

"Growing potatoes is a lot like gambling," Taylor continued. "It gets in your blood... especially if you hit a good year and end up with more money than you can spend. It's a lot riskier than raising wheat."

Taylor, with years of experience in raising the tubers behind his belt, feels that he has at least as good—and probably better—chance than the corporate farms at continuing to profit from the county's booming spud trade.

He raises his potatoes on a four-year rotation program, switching his spud ground with wheat land, giving his potato acreage a much longer rest than other county growers. "I don't know of anyone who is doing more than one year in rotation, and a lot of the places raise potatoes back-to-back," he said.

While the corporate farms are able to arrange the financing for new equipment, new wells and new pivot systems to increase potato production, they have more than their share of problems, according to Taylor.

"Sometimes when I think I'm having it rough, I'll go over to one of the big operations and see my problems multiplied ten times," said Taylor. "I always feel better after making one of those trips."

"I think a lot of the big operations will eventually break down," Taylor said.

"They're just too hard to manage... you can't run them as efficient as you can an individual operation. And I don't care how good a man you are, you just don't look after things as well for someone else as you do for yourself." Taylor said he believes that the amount of new potato acreage added to Morrow County will decline for the next couple of years, until prices swing significantly upward again.

There always will be a future for potatoes in Morrow County," the independent grower stated, "but I think there will be a change in terms of who's growing them."



Out of the ground and into the truck go these potatoes on the Paul Taylor ranch (top photo). These late season Russets averaged about 28 tons per acre, a good yield for a good growing season. The Taylor spuds are bought exclusively for use as french fries. Their selling price is based on quality, grade and specific gravity. In bottom photo, truck leaves massive potato plantation at Sabre Farms, one of many corporate potato ventures in northern Morrow County.

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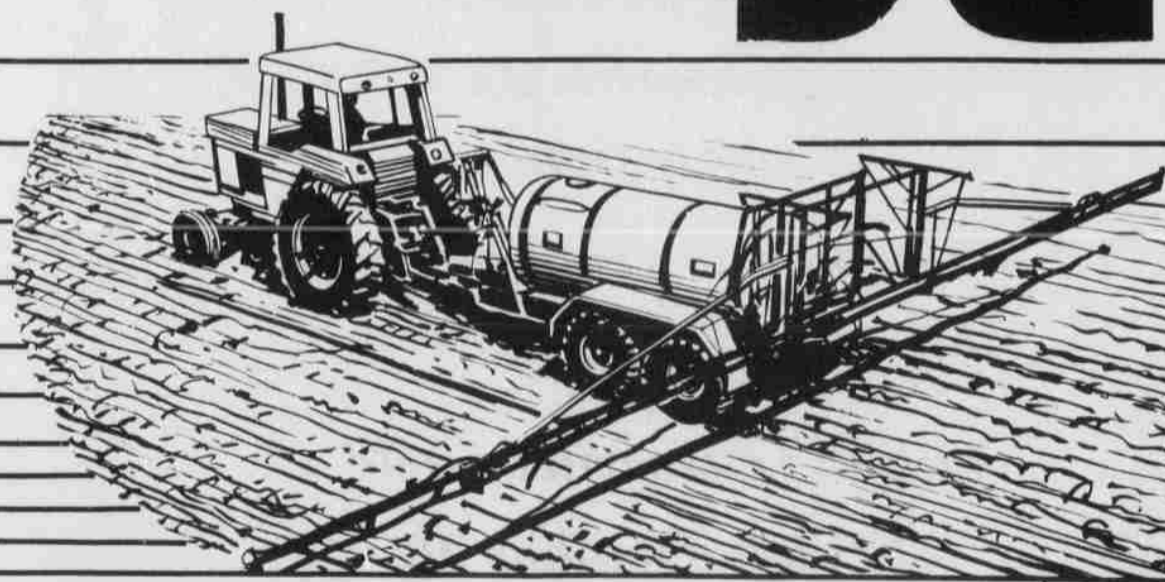
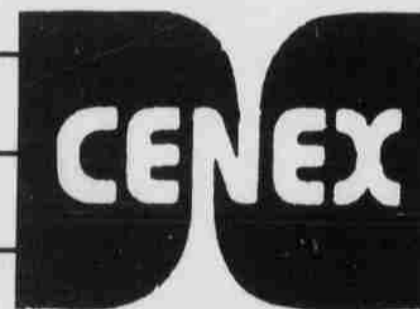
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