

# IDAHO POTATOES

## Idaho potato acreage is down but quality is expected strong

By Tom Karst

**A**creage and yield might be down for Idaho potatoes, but higher fresh packouts could help to counter those realities, said Ross Johnson, vice president of retail and international for the Idaho Potato Commission.

In 2021, Idaho growers harvested about 315,000 acres. Johnson said the harvested acreage estimate for 2022 is about 295,000 acres, or down about 7%.

About 40% of Idaho potatoes are typically sold for the fresh market, with about 60% processed.

Based on the growing conditions in Idaho, Johnson said industry expectations were initially that yields would be typical.

As harvest progressed, however, Johnson said farmers were finding that the potatoes just didn't bulk up as expected.

Also, some growers reported somewhat of a smaller size profile than expected. Despite the lower volume, Johnson said the quality of the 2022 crop is very good, perhaps the best in recent memory.

Last season, fresh packouts were ranging from 60% to 70%, but the 2022 crop is seeing fresh packouts as high as 85% or 90% he said.

With its 16 or so fresh shippers, Idaho typically supplies about 50% of the U.S. fresh potato volume each year, Johnson said.

Beyond the trademark russet potato, Idaho is the nation's leading supplier of yellow potatoes in the U.S., he said.

### Supply mix

Fresh volume will "definitely" be down, Johnson said.

The cost of growing has caused some pullback in acreage. The war in Ukraine contributed to inflation in the cost of fertilizer and other inputs, and labor stresses have caused packers to invest in automation, raising costs for suppliers. In sum, buyers of potatoes will see higher prices this season.

"You can't run the 10-pound bag for a \$1.99 (retail) anymore," Johnson said. While retailers still view that price point as "normal," there is a new normal now. Even with higher prices, Johnson said potatoes, pound for pound, are still the best value in the produce department.

What's more, potatoes have a long shelf



Potato harvest was active in early October near Rexburg, Idaho. Shippers said most potato harvesting would wrap up by mid-October. Photo: Courtesy Wilcox Fresh

life compared to many other produce items.

### Consumer response

In response to inflation, Johnson said the Idaho Potato Commission has observed that consumer spending has shifted, with shoppers transitioning to larger pack sizes to save money.

"The fact that we have a smaller profile is actually good for retailers, because that's really what (consumers) are looking for," he said.

For this season, retailers might want to consider a smaller size for bulk displays

the produce department, depending on their customer base and market strategy. Some retailers like to feature potatoes as big as 40-count russets, but those larger potatoes are more expensive this season in comparison to smaller count sizes.

Overall, Johnson said demand prospects are good for potatoes this year.

Some consumers are trying to eat out less to save money, and that bodes extremely well for retail.

"We're seeing customer traffic is up across the board with retailers, which is really good," he said. At the same time, Johnson said foodservice demand seems to

be holding its own.

"We're seeing demand for potatoes is increasing across the board," he said. "Regardless of the sector that you're in, you recognize the value that potatoes are offering."

Consumers see that potatoes can extend their food budget, and foodservice operators know potatoes can satisfy hearty appetites.

"Potatoes offer, pound for pound, the best value, regardless of where you're at," Johnson said. "It is just nice to [offer] a vegetable that they can count on." **P**