

WASHINGTON POTATOES

Good potato crop expected in Washington

By Tom Karst

Despite a cold spring, Washington state potato growers are anticipating a good crop for 2023, says Washington Potato Commission Executive Director Chris Voigt.

“Our crop has caught up [from the cold spring], and we’ll start harvesting our baby potatoes in early July, our early processing varieties around July 14, and our fresh russets the last week of July,” Voigt said. “We’re optimistic on what our yields might be because the weather has been so good. Not too hot, not too cold.”

Harvest continues into early November, and Washington’s state-of-the-art storage systems ensure that the industry can provide high-quality potatoes all year round.

Ninety percent of the potatoes produced in Washington end up as a processed potato product, but the state’s growers provide an important role in providing fresh potatoes, Voigt said.

Washington is the earliest of the fall potato-producing states to start harvest. Not only that, but Washington growers also provide some of the highest-quality red and yellow potatoes, he said.

“We do see a continued growth of yellow varieties and a reduction in red potatoes,” Voigt said.

A significant amount of round white potatoes is grown for domestic and international chipping companies.

“We also produce a lot of small baby potatoes that are provided to several different companies that specialize in packing 1- and 2-pound packages of baby potatoes,” he said.

Voigt said the industry expects acreage to be up about 5,000 acres compared to last year, with anticipations that the USDA will report Washington potato growers have planted just over 165,000 acres this year.

Marketing focus

The 2022-23 marketing year for the Washington Potato Commission focused on digital marketing. That tactic allowed the commission to target a larger audience than it has in the past, Voigt said.

“With social media and some OTT (streaming TV) ads, we were able to hit multiple demographics and target our messages specifically to that audience,” Voigt said.

The marketing efforts focused on five pillars, including sustainability, food shortages, generational farming, supply chain and water/wildlife.

“All five of these pillars really target the heart of the Washington growers,” Voigt said. “We wanted to tell the story of the passion our growers have to feed the people of Washington and the world. For our upcoming year, we are going to continue to share those messages and expand with some additional messages about generational farms and how lucky Washington growers are to have the Columbia and Snake Rivers for their irrigation. We want consumers to know how growers value the resources they have and continue to grow the best potatoes in the world for them, potatoes they are proud of and feed their own families.”

In the past year, the Washington Potato Commission worked with some social media influencers. The commission had an event at a grower’s farm in Skagit Valley to show the influencers how potatoes are grown and talk about the five pillars.

“We had a roundtable discussion with the growers and influencers to talk about issues our growers are facing with new regulations that are being put on them,” Voigt said.

The roundtable also gave the opportunity for the influencers to ask about their passion of farming, he said.

After the event, Voigt said the influencers posted content and videos on their social media platforms describing their experiences and discussing what they learned to their audiences, giving the industry the opportunity to reach demographics that it wouldn’t normally reach.

“Our goal is to educate people that potatoes are in fact grown here in Washington, but [they are] grown best here with the sustainable practices,” he said. “Washington potatoes are nutritious, and we want consumers to look at the potatoes they are buying in the stores and make sure they are purchasing a locally grown Washington potato.”

Export strength

Export demand for all fresh and processed potato products is strong, Voigt said.

“Washington tends to focus our fresh potato exports to western Canada and to the Pacific Rim, but there are some loads that go to Mexico,” he said. “Our processed potato products are shipped to over 80 countries but the bulk of them flow to the Pacific Rim. Potato production in the [European Union] is suffering some setbacks due to heat stress and drought, so this will give us an opportunity to take some market share back that we lost due to two years of lower yields.” **P**



Washington is the earliest of the fall potato-producing states to start harvest. Photo: weyo, Adobe Stock

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Columbia Basin onion crop catching up from cold spring

By Tom Karst

After erratic spring weather, onion crop prospects in the Columbia Basin shared by Washington and Oregon have improved to strong levels, according to extension educators in the region.

“Onion [maturity] may be a little slower than in a normal year, but not by much,” said Tim Waters, extension educator for Washington State University.

The onion season began with cold and wet weather in the spring, said Stuart Reitz,

extension educator for Oregon State University in Ontario, Ore.

Reitz said that cold and wet weather delayed plantings for some onion growers. Still, he said “Goldilocks” weather (when conditions are just right) since then has allowed onion plants to catch up.

Onion acreage is likely about the same in the Columbia Basin and Treasure Valley (a region in the eastern part of Oregon and southwest Idaho), Reitz said.

Yellow onions account for about 80% of total onion acreage, he said. Red onions have been growing in importance and now

account for 15% of total Columbia Basin onion acreage, with white onions accounting for about 5%.

The Columbia Basin’s early onion harvest will likely start in early August, with storage onions beginning at the end of August or early September. Onions will be harvested and put in storage through September and into October.

Most of Washington’s storage onions are grown in the Columbia Basin, with the majority planted in Grant, Franklin and Adams counties, Waters said.

Onion acreage in the Columbia Basin shared by Oregon and Washington totals about 25,000 acres, Waters said. Onion harvest in the region begins in the late summer and can extend into the fall. Storage onions can be marketed from storage for up to eight months.

Waters said the onion crop was facing some weed pressure in the early summer, which will result in higher weed-control costs. Some growers are using robotic weed-control machines, he said.

Storage onion acreage in the Treasure Valley region, accounts for about 20,000 to 25,000 acres, he said.

Many onions in the Treasure Valley will be shipped to the East, Waters said, while many of the Columbia Basin onions will move north and south, in addition to off-shore export destinations.

The leading county for nonstorage bulb onion production is Walla Walla in Washington, which began harvest in late June. Growers in Walla Walla harvest both over-

wintered onions and spring-planted sweet onions. Walla Walla onions are typically available from late spring to early fall, with the peak season from June to August.

Trends and challenges

For growers in the Columbia Basin, Waters said one trend over the past decade is larger, and fewer, farms.

In addition, onion acreage planted under for dehydrated processors has increased as better water availability in the Columbia Basin from the Canadian Rockies-fed Columbia River, compared with California, has shifted acreage from the Golden State to the Northwest.

That, Waters said, has increased acreage of dehydrated onions and garlic in the Columbia Basin.

“The Columbia Basin has gotten to be kind of a hot spot for a lot of crops,” Reitz said.

Reitz said that labor is a huge challenge for growers.

“There is interest in trying to mechanize things as much as possible to get around those constraints,” he said.

For example, some growers are using robotic weeders.

The H-2A guest worker program has become more important to growers, he said. **P**

Onion acreage in the Columbia Basin shared by Oregon and Washington totals about 25,000 acres. Onion harvest in the region begins in the late summer and can extend into the fall.

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