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Idaho potato industry convenes at annual IGSA conference

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SUN VALLEY, ID -- As a wildfire raged just a few miles from the site of the Idaho Grower-Shipper Association's 79th annual meeting, held here Aug. 29-31, members of the Idaho potato industry tackled their own hot topics and explored ways to better manage and promote the state's most important produce crop.

The 72-square-mile fire, which started Aug. 16 as the result of a lightning strike, forced the evacuation of about 2,500 homes in the Ketchum area just a mile down the road from the Sun Valley Lodge and Inn, where the industry gathered to hear forecasts of the 2007-08 Idaho potato season.

In a presentation Aug. 29 about the status of the industry, Jerry Wright of the United Potato Growers of Idaho said that in the past year, Idaho potato shipments were basically flat yet market share rose by 1 percent, giving growers reason for optimism due to achieving growth in a declining market. In fact, Mr. Wright's data showed that Idaho leads the way among potato-producing states. Packout for the 2006-07 season was "off the chart" at 62 percent compared to a normal 50-54 percent. Also, a more "normal" crop is expected, without an overabundance of 1- and 2-size tubers.

Following Mr. Wright's presentation, Don Odiorne, vice president of foodservice for the Idaho Potato Commission, was joined by Tom Stenzel, president of the United Fresh Produce Association, and Chef Chris Koetke, dean of the culinary school Kendall College in Chicago, in examining food safety issues with regard to potatoes.

Mr. Odiorne said that it is important to be able to trace potatoes back to a specific grower and an actual field, not just a storage unit, and he added that advances with global positioning satellite systems would make this happen in the near future.

But the potato industry faces unique challenges when it comes to tracing product, such as multiple

companies supplying the same potatoes to one end-user and informal shipping arrangements from one shipper to another, according to Mr. Odiorne.

He also said that with last year's E. coli outbreak tied to fresh spinach, the food safety standards are now high with regard to expectations from customers. "We need to have a specific plan, because without one, a customer sets his own guidelines," he said. "We can't keep people in the dark. We need to take an aggressive approach and be a leader in this area."

Mr. Odiorne then showed a video produced by Markon Cooperative Inc. in Salinas, CA, as an example of effective communication about food safety practices. He also stressed the importance of having a single contact at a company to address food safety concerns.

Mr. Koetke gave the perspective of both an educator and a foodservice operator. He started by saying that food safety -- or sanitation, as it is known in culinary speak -- "is front and center in every student's education."

While HACCP and recordkeeping are important for a foodservice operator, Mr. Koetke said that monitoring handwashing procedures, cross-contamination risks, and time and temperature issues are also crucial.

"In fact, most sanitation issues in restaurants involve [improper] handwashing," he said, adding that technology now exists that requires restaurant workers to swipe their work identifications to activate a sink, thereby monitoring the number of times a worker washes his or her hands during a shift.

Like Mr. Odiorne, Mr. Koetke stressed the importance of having a single person address inquiries about a potential food-safety issue. He also said that it is important for an operator to fill out a foodborne illness form upon learning of a potential problem, with information about what an afflicted person ate as well as the names of the other people in the party and what they ate.

Regarding what operators expect from their suppliers, Mr. Koetke said that he expects safe products and timely alerts if an issue does arise. As such, he strives to work with reputable suppliers that have the ability to trace product back to the source.

Mr. Stenzel, who has been closely involved with food-safety issues during the past year as president of United, said that while potatoes are not a high-risk item since they are not eaten raw, the potato industry is nonetheless part of the overall produce industry that has lost the confidence of consumers during the past year. "There's a feeling among consumers that produce is not the safest food item," he said.

Food-safety laws are on the way out of Washington, DC, and people can expect a fundamental reform in food safety with the change in the presidency in 2008, he said. "At this point, the outcome is unclear. It's a lot like making sausage: you don't really want to watch it, but you hope it tastes good at the end."

Mr. Stenzel added that more attention will be paid to imports due to the issues out of China, and he suspects that U.S. shippers can expect retaliation from other countries.

He then compared the potato industry to the tomato industry, stating that the latter is moving away from its practice of blending product due to an inability to pinpoint the source of product. "The same could be the case for potatoes," he said in urging members of the industry to prepare for a possible

change.

New varieties Another business session held during the IGSA conference titled "New Varieties for Today's Consumer" examined trends in potato varieties.

Mac Johnson of the U.S. Potato Board said that today's consumers include an aging population with more empty nesters and Baby Boomers; a growing number of one- and two-person households; growing ethnicity and diversity; and new influences on food, such as the Internet, the Food Network and the prevalence of more produce-savvy stores like Wegman's and Whole Foods.

Mr. Johnson said that all these influences have exposed consumers to new ideas about produce and potatoes, including looking beyond the traditional russet variety that is the mainstay of the Idaho industry.

"There have been big increases in golds, purples, specialties and organics, and consumers are willing to pay more for new and unique things," he said. "Smaller retailers are looking more at specialty varieties, but big retailers are also taking notice."

He added that it is important to know one's customers, as "the typical Wal-Mart shopper is not a Fingerling buyer," he said. "It's important to provide a choice."

Mr. Odiorne of the Idaho Potato Commission continued on the theme of the change in the variety trend, stating that the Idaho potato industry is predominantly russet (94 percent of production out of the state), and that there are opportunities to expand. He said that chefs are constantly looking for new ways to prepare potatoes, and typically look to Idaho for help. By diversifying and supplying other varieties, the Idaho industry can become an even stronger source for chefs.

Mr. Odiorne said that many independent and chain restaurants are now featuring Yukon Gold potatoes on their menus, and it is incumbent on shippers to meet the changing needs of restaurant operators in order to maintain their market share.

Some of the ways that the commission is attempting to keep the Idaho industry at the forefront is through its Fresh Shipper booklet, which provides descriptions and photos; by using its field staff to convey information about the availability of product; and by getting the varieties in front of chefs at various conferences.

Mr. Odiorne also recommends that the Idaho industry form a clearinghouse for sourcing potatoes, increase its specialty acreage, communicate with its customers, and provide samplings and preparation tips.

Ken Tubman, who is the East Coast representative for the Idaho Potato Commission, added that it is very important to interact as much as possible with store buyers. He said that in 1997, the average vegetable buyer had oversight of 250 SKUs; today, the average buyer oversees 450 SKUs. A survey conducted by the commission shows that potatoes are on ad almost daily, compared to twice a month in 1997. Of the ads over the last 12 months, nearly 15,000 promoted potatoes, with more than 6,000 specifically for russets.

Mr. Johnson of the U.S. Potato Board summed up the segment by saying, "Idaho is the russet king, but you must think outside the box to maintain superiority."

Networking opportunities As in past years, the IGSA conference provided an abundance of networking opportunities set in the scenic surrounds of Sun Valley, with a bowling tournament, horseshoe tournament and trapshooting event Aug. 30, followed by a cocktail party that evening sponsored by Union Pacific Railroad.

The annual men's and ladies' shotgun golf tournaments were held Aug. 31. The closing banquet capped off the activities that evening.

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