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Louisiana Sweet Potato Commission expects increased sweet potatoes prices

February 5, 2019

Wet weather negatively affected the 2018 Louisiana sweet potato growing season causing some crops to go unharvested.

“We’re expecting not to have a surplus by any means,” said René Simon, director of the Louisiana Sweet Potato Commission, based in Baton Rouge, LA. “I don’t believe there’s going to be an oversupply of sweet potatoes in 2019. In fact, I think that there’s going to be a shortage. But that’s just my estimate without having talked to my counterparts in other parts of the country.”

Because of that, Simon expects to see some increases in prices, which have already started to happen.



The Louisiana Sweet Potato Commission is changing

up its slogan in 2019, going to “It’s Yam Near Perfect,” calling on all the good attributes that sweet potatoes have. “Typically, at this time of year, you might see some stagnation — if not decreases — in prices, but my growers are telling me that prices are holding steady and not going down,” he said. “We are seeing more acres in Louisiana every year.”

A big problem with this year’s sweet potato harvest has been the guava root-knot nematode parasite, which is effecting the industry and causing states to quarantine other states, especially as it relates to movement of seed potatoes, fresh market potatoes and processor potatoes.

“In Louisiana, we’ve been dealing with this southern root-knot nematode for years, but we’ve been able to keep it under control,” Simon said. “This guava root-knot nematode originated in Florida, came into the United States on some landscape stock, and that somehow got transferred to North Carolina and Louisiana this past year on a load of seed sweet potatoes.”

That’s meant quarantining some of the areas in the state, in addition to sweet potatoes it can also affect cotton, soybeans and sugar cane.

“We have taken a proactive approach,” Simon said. “I’ve spent a lot of time, as has the horticulture and quarantined division of the Louisiana Department of Agriculture and forestry, ensuring that we don’t let this new pest spread across the state because of its potential impact on other commodities.”

Not all the news is bad though. In addition to the increases in prices expected this year to offset the decrease in supply, the commission is also getting more inquiries from other places about possibly shipping sweet potatoes to their areas.

Mexico, for instance, is very interested and Simon was there this summer with the American Sweet Potato Marketing Institute doing market research and education work.

“There seems to be a real demand for United States sweet potatoes; that’s a real positive,” he said. “They are just starting to use sweet potatoes in Mexico. They have a small industry there, mostly used to make candy, but people are starting to realize the healthy benefits and are looking for United States sweet potatoes because of the quality that we offer.”

Retailers that want to capitalize on an increased demand for sweet potatoes should tout the health benefits and versatility of the product, said Simon. “It seems like every time you look at a recipe, sweet potatoes are involved,” he said. “Everything from using it as a part of a salad to using it in a traditional way of baking and using it in a desert or just putting it in the center of the plate.”

As far as merchandizing goes, Simon thinks retailers should make the area more attractive. Whether that’s by putting out bright boxes or making them more prominent in the store, reminding people about sweet potatoes year-round will go along way.

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“We’re excited about the ad campaign and think it’s going to add excitement to the category,” Simon said.

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