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## **Maine Potato Board preps for exciting season ahead**

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The Maine Potato Board is aiming to continue its winning streak by following up on last year's very successful season with one that is nearly as good.

"We've just been over a long harvest that went much longer than we hoped, but that being said, we got the crop out of the ground and I think it's a quality crop and I don't see any issues as far as storage, so I guess we're pretty thankful that way compared to what happened across some other parts of the potato industry," said Donald E. Flannery, executive director of the board, headquartered in Presque Isle, ME.

Indeed, a recent report by the USFA rated Maine's potato farmers a 310 to 320 hundredweight per acre on yield, which is a little above average.



Maine potato farmers are racing toward another strong season. “That has everyone pleased in light of that,” Flannery said. “That’s kind of the baseline we’re working from. Demand so far on the fresh market has been good. We have some of our packers gearing up, and over the last couple of weeks they started packing, so I think demand on the fresh side is going to be good, and that always bodes well for everybody’s attitudes going into a shipping season for sure.”

That yield, he said, pretty much equals last year’s, which might have been 10 hundredweight more.

“Quality and demand were good, so this will hopefully be two years in a row where we have a quality crop to put down the road and have good demand for it,” Flannery said.

While Maine grows some yellows and reds, the state is primarily known for its round whites, but Flannery said there have been some shifts in recent years into different types of Russet varieties, and he sees that trend continuing.

“And mainly, I think that’s going to be because we have — out of the University of Maine Potato Breeding Program — a variety that was introduced about three years ago called Caribou Russet, which has shown to be a real strong contender as it relates to being able to be packed in the fresh market,” Flannery said.

The Caribou, he noted, has good consistency in terms of type, size and yield.

“So, I think we’ve seen some shifting a little bit toward a few more Russet-type potatoes than round white,” he added. “But that being said, the round whites are a big part of our market. And particularly in the East, there’s still some good strong market opportunities for the round white.”

The Maine Potato Board is different from its counterparts in other states in that a few years ago, its leaders looked at its resources and developed a plan on how they could be used to benefit growers.

“It became very obvious that with our limited resources, which is always money, that doing any type of large-scale promotion marketing effort wouldn’t move the needle,” he said. “Our budget is a little over \$1 million; so, if we spent our whole budget on marketing, while \$1 million sounds like a lot of money, in the real world it isn’t.”

Therefore, it realigned a little bit.

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“We tend to focus on the things that help our growers that are harder for them to do,” Flannery said. “We spend a lot of our time on legislative policy both at the state and federal level. We do a lot of work on pesticide issues at the state and federal level.”

The board also put resources into research from the breeding program and other research of the University of Maine that benefits growers. The team includes an agronomist, as well as an engineer who collaborates with growers on storage and technology, including precision agriculture and irrigation.

A few years ago, the board also added a plant pathologist who works with growers and the department of agriculture and oversees a disease testing lab.

“We’re a little bit different in that way,” Flannery said. “We partner with some of our packers and dealers on something they’re doing, more or less on PR and social media types of things. But as far as full-blown effort from our organization to market this crop, we do it through social media, PR or partnering with dealers and packers here.”

It’s a partnership that has been beneficial to Maine’s potato growers.

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