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Virtual Big Idaho Potato Harvest meeting focuses on COVID-19 response

By

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As with so many other produce industry events, the annual Big Idaho Potato Harvest Meeting went virtual this year. Held Thursday, Nov. 12, the meeting zoomed in on the industry's response to market disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

"This year has posed many challenges," said Frank Muir, president and CEO of the Idaho Potato Commission, in Eagle, ID. "We have had many mountains to climb. Among them, at planting time we were hit with an incredible cold front, with several back-to-back days of frost. Then the pandemic struck, and almost overnight, 60 percent of volume was put at risk."



Frank Muir

The retail side of the business had the opposite problem. Panic buying stripped potatoes off retail shelves as quickly as it did bathroom tissue and bleach, demonstrating that people who were suddenly going to have to prepare their meals at home viewed potatoes as a must-have item. The result was a glut of larger, foodservice-sized potatoes and a dire shortage of smaller-sized potatoes in retail bags. Then processors “began to cut back contracts in the middle of the planting season,” Muir said. “The potato industry was facing some severe financial harm.”

A nimble response turned what could have been an economic disaster for the industry into a profitable year with a promising outlook for the year ahead. Taking immediate action, the IPC “pivoted with our programs to adjust to what was happening,” Muir said. “We worked very closely with our shippers here in Idaho as well as our retail customers. We began immediately shipping foodservice cartons to retail customers to fill the empty retail shelves.”

The cartons enabled retailers to create instant displays by placing opened cartons directly on the shelves. The IPC also assisted retailers in building huge waterfall displays with the jumbo potatoes. Shoppers readily made the adjustment to the larger sizes, and some even took a whole 50-pound carton to the checkout stand.

Then shoppers began demanding that the potatoes be sold in bags. Again, the IPC pivoted. “We worked with our bag suppliers and our shippers to turn on the generator and produce bags of jumbo potatoes for a 1,000-pound jumbo bin promotion. We sold over 2,000 truckloads of these full-sized bins of jumbo potatoes that would normally have gone to foodservice, Muir said.

On the consumer side the IPC launched a campaign to educate consumers on how to store and how to use Idaho potatoes. Those adjustments helped keep retail shelves stocked when demand was as much as 50 percent higher than the same months a year prior. That took much of the pressure off of the excess carton volume, but it still didn’t fully compensate for the loss in foodservice sales.

The IPC also made quick adjustments to its foodservice outreach. “It was very critical to work hand-

to-hand, face-to-face with our operators and distributors,” Muir said. “We worked directly with our operators to try to help them shift from sit-down dining to take-out and delivery. We educated operators on how to make this conversion and how to use Idaho potatoes in making more economic and easy-to-use recipes for take-out.”

The IPC, in conjunction with other state potato groups and the National Potato Council work with government to secure financial support for potato growers, Muir said. “We helped our federal government see the importance of including potatoes in the USDA Bonus Buy program and also got included in the Trade Mitigation program and in the Farm-to-Family Food Box Program as well as other programs,” he added.

The effect of those efforts resulted in a dramatic reduction of Idaho potato stocks, Muir said. “What could have been a total disaster transformed into a cleaning up of the 2019-20 crop, with the potatoes moving out at profitable prices, making a smooth transition into the recently-completed 2020 harvest,” he said. “Demand continues to be strong at retail, but it is also recovering more quickly than anybody anticipated at foodservice.”

Also speaking at the virtual Big Idaho Potato Harvest Meeting were Kam Quarles, CEO of the National Potato Council and Blair Richardson, CEO and president of Potatoes USA.

“It is remarkable how different our activities and interactions are today as compared to what they were at the Potatoes USA Annual Meeting in March,” said Richardson. “These changes were a necessary and appropriate reaction to the massive changes faced by the foodservice operators adapting to the new rules and regulations. It was critical that we shift with them and support their needs as they struggled in this chaotic environment.”

Quarles described how state and national potato organizations sprang into action and worked with government agencies to implement an effective plan to immediately provide relief for potato farmers whose livelihoods were threatened.

“First, we had to push USDA to temporarily become our customer in the absence of the foodservice industry, in order to clear out the growing backlog,” he said. “Second, USDA needed to provide meaningful disaster relief to growers to stabilize family farms until the market strengthened.

“The USDA responded by providing both the largest surplus commodities purchase program in our industry’s history and the largest direct payment disaster relief program for growers in our industry’s history,” he concluded.

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