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## **Maine Farmers Exchange talks variety and Farm-to-Family Program**

By

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Though times have been tough this past year, Maine Farmers continues to push ahead, dealing in fresh potatoes for seed, table stock and processing. “Between the pandemic and the weather it’s been a challenging year,” said Bob Davis, president of Maine Farmers Exchange, based in Presque Isle, ME. “But the USDA box program and a steady market for staples like potatoes has kept us going.”



Bob Davis, Dixie Shaw of

the Catholic Charities of Maine, Shawn Lovely of Pineland Farms and Steve Davis, RN Health and Safety coordinator. Photo courtesy of the Maine Farmers Exchange.

Though Maine is mostly known for its round whites, other varieties have found success and Maine Farmers Exchange looks to sell variety this season. “We have supplies of round whites, reds, yellows and Russets which are the four basic categories,” said Davis. “I anticipate good demand for all the varieties and sizes of potatoes from Maine right through to the first of the year.”

In the past few years, a new up-and-coming variety has been the Caribou Russet according to Davis. “It hasn’t been a gangbuster, but its big advantage is that it can be used for fries as well as a table stock potato,” he explained. “For Northeast production, Russet Burbanks don’t lend themselves to packaging because they will grow crooked, but a Caribou Russet grows well here. The Caribou Russet has opened the door for growers and marketers to have flexibility.”

Maine Farmers Exchange has been involved with the USDA’s Farmers to Families Food Box Program during the summer and fall, which Davis noted aided in potato movement. “The program really helped us as a company and our growers,” he said. “We distributed over 100,000 boxes to non profit organizations in the state of Maine.”

According to Davis, the USDA Box Program as well as processing options helped move potatoes from the 2019 crop to make room for the new crop. “We were able to process some supply and move volume through the USDA program over the summer,” he said. “The program was buying 3-or 5-pound bags to put into the food boxes. It created a lot of demand for potatoes every day. The program ends at the end of December.”

Davis explained the company also looks to continue investment in food safety. “This is always a big issue for us,” he said. “We’re always trying to take another step forward in assuring food safety from

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the time you plant to the time you pack. We're getting better and better at traceability and we're also promoting the sustainability of our agriculture. We're doing things in soil conservation, such as promoting soil health, so we can continue to use the land we have."

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