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**Maine potato growers rise to the challenge of weather and pandemic**

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By

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This past year has thrown several challenges at Maine potato farmers, leading to decreased production amidst the chaos of a pandemic. The USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service's crop production forecast for November reported Maine potato production at 13.4 million cwt, down 20 percent from last year's forecast. The report further explained planted acreage at 51 thousand acres is down 2 percent and the yield forecast at 265 cwt per acre is down 18 percent from last year.

Bob Davis, president at Maine Farmers Exchange, based in Presque Isle, ME, attributed the decrease to a very dry summer. "It will make our crop the smallest Maine has had since 1918," he said. "Dry weather was not our friend."

The drought negatively affected most of the growing regions this past year according to Ken Gad, president of Cambridge Farms, based in South Easton, MA. "We had a lot of drought on the East Coast which caused difficulty with respect to size and yields," he said. "Maine was very dry in most of the production areas, most of the time. They did not get the yields they would have liked to produce. But they do have quality — the quality is very nice."

Despite the lower production volume, the industry expected adequate movement and demand for product through the winter season. "We foresee good demand through the holidays because our best time to move table stock is Thanksgiving and Christmas," said Davis. "We're looking at having steady demand and supply for all the varieties and sizes of potatoes right through the first of the year."

With production down and the effects of the pandemic, returns to the grower are even more important this year. "We must look at how to create a scenario where we can get growers enough return on a smaller crop to keep them in business," explained Gad. "At the same time, we need to ensure value at the retail store since consumers are very price conscious. It's challenging all around."

To best support the growers, marketers are counting on moving available volume at decent prices. "With the crop being down 20 percent, you need good prices," said Davis. "If we can keep the current pace, finish up a decent Thanksgiving push and get a nice Christmas push, the growers will be OK."

Transportation presents an additional wrench in the gears this year. "Freight has become a major factor," said Gad. "Everybody is talking about how much it takes to get it from point A to point B."

Gad described how increasing limitations in train service resulted in more products being transported via truck thus adding to the competition. "Especially now, because of the pandemic, trucks are tight and at a premium," he said.

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Yet, the transportation crunch may hold a silver lining for Maine potatoes as buyers explore saving money by purchasing closer to home. “The big trend in commodities is how buyers are looking at more regionalized sourcing to lower the transportation cost,” explained Gad. “Even though a retailer might want Idaho product in their ad, they may look at Eastern Russets instead because by the time they ship potatoes from Idaho, the freight can be more than twice the cost of the product.”

Additionally, Gad surmised high transportation costs may allow for slightly more in product pricing. “It will help us get a bit more return back to the grower,” he said. “That’s where this regionalizing trend will help our growers.”

Maine’s location sets it up to take prime advantage of the regionalization trend in sourcing. “We sit on top of the largest population centers in the Northeast,” said Davis. “We are only a few hours from major metropolitan areas such as Philadelphia and New York. This gives us a good strong marketing advantage with all the varieties we have to sell.”

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