



- Advertisement -

IPC president to retire in September

By

Rand Green

March 29, 2021

Frank Muir, who has been president and CEO of the Idaho Potato Commission since July 2003, announced that he would be retiring in six months.

“In my commission meeting on Wednesday [March 24], I made an announcement on my plans to retire,” Muir told The Produce News. “I haven’t set a specific date,” but it will be sometime around mid-September.

When Muir took the helm at the IPC 18 years ago, farm gate revenues for Idaho potatoes were at a 15-year low. Nationally, the famous and once highly regarded Idaho russet had lost much of its sheen; studies showed that although almost everyone throughout country still associated potatoes with Idaho, the consumer preference for Idaho potatoes that had once been prevalent had diminished.

Moreover, potatoes in general were under attack from proponents of low-carb diets, and nearly every media mention of potatoes was negative.



Even in the state of Idaho, there was much indifference toward Idaho potatoes and almost a sense of embarrassment that it was potatoes for which Idaho was best known. The Idaho brand had become “pretty stale,” Muir said.

Selected from a field of 150 candidates, Muir brought with him a strong branded foods marketing background including 18 years with Conagra, managing a diverse \$1 billion portfolio of leading brands,

He was brought aboard, he said, “to turn this thing around,” and turn it around he did — with strong support from the commissioners, the commission staff and members of the industry, as he is quick to point out. “Obviously, I don’t do this by myself.”

Muir’s first focus was to launch a campaign to fight back against the prevalent scientifically flawed misinformation that potatoes were deficient in nutritional and dietary benefits. That effort began with the production of a nutrition-focused television commercial “based on the surprise notion that Idaho potatoes are loaded with nutrients.”

To bolster the message that Idaho potatoes are an important component in a performance diet, the commission hired fitness guru Denise Austin as a spokesperson for Idaho potatoes. Austin represented Idaho potatoes for 10 years, appeared in IPC commercials year after year, went to trade shows and made numerous media appearances.

Muir, himself, did hundreds of media interviews to change the public perception about potatoes.

Additionally, “I worked with the American Heart Association to get Idaho potatoes certified as a heart-healthy food,” he said.

Today, media mentions of potatoes are much more likely than not to tout their dietary benefits. “But the fight-back campaign continues today, because you cannot rest on your laurels thinking that people are going to remember that potatoes are good for you,” he said.

In 2003, Idaho was “a one-potato state,” growing russets almost exclusively, Muir said. He saw no reason that Idaho should not be the No. 1 state for all potato varieties, and he urged growers to diversify. Some chose to do so in a big way, and today Idaho is No. 1 not only in russets but also in yellows and “probably in fingerlings” and is No. 2 in reds.

Muir also challenged shippers to expand their markets internationally. They did so, and immediately Idaho became the market leader in Mexico. Today, Idaho ships fresh potatoes to 20 countries.

Believing that the Grown in Idaho brand had potential in frozen potatoes as well as fresh and dehy, Muir made numerous presentations to frozen food processors. “Finally, one of those organizations, Lamb Weston, did their own research and verified exactly what I had been saying,” then launched a full line of 100 percent grown-in-Idaho frozen potato products in what has “probably been the most successful launch in their history,” Muir said. The fresh industry has benefitted from many synergies, including a Grown in Idaho advertising campaign that is coordinated with the commission’s own advertising flights.

The IPC’s marketing and advertising efforts under Muir have garnered more than 100 awards.

But nothing has captured the attention of the public and the media more than the rollout of a nationwide Big Idaho Potato Truck tour 10 years ago on the IPC’s 75th anniversary. It was so successful that it has continued every year since, with the exception of a pandemic-induced hiatus.

“We have been to all 48 contiguous states multiple times,” including several events each year with more than 300,000 attendees, and are always invited back, Muir said. Wherever it goes, the massive Idaho potato replica on a flatbed trailer draws huge crowds, “and we always get local television coverage.” Tied to the truck tour is a campaign called The Big Helping to support local causes.

For the past 10 years, the IPC has sponsored The Famous Idaho Potato Bowl held at Albertson’s Stadium in Boise, ID. With more than 2 million viewers and listeners, it is essentially “a four-hour infomercial for Idaho potatoes,” he said.

And in recent years, in front of the Idaho State Capitol on New Year’s Eve, more than 30,000 people from all over the world gather in freezing weather to see a 30-foot Idaho potato being dropped on the stroke of midnight. This in front of the very Capitol where 18 years ago lawmakers tried to get “Famous Potatoes” removed from automobile license plates until Muir intervened.

These and other initiatives under Muir’s leadership have factored largely in a significant turnaround for the Idaho potato industry. Following the low point in 2003, growers saw eight successive years of increases in farm gate revenues for Idaho potatoes, nearly doubling by 2011 as revenues topped \$1 billion for the first time in history. It has been at or near that every year since and has exceeded \$1 billion for each of the past four years, including last year, the pandemic notwithstanding.

But Muir takes particular pride in the successes of the past year.

“I couldn’t be more proud of what our team has done during this last year, during the pandemic,” Muir said. “I have hired all but one of our current staff. I am very proud of the fact that this is a team I

have assembled and I can endorse. They are very loyal to this industry, and they go the extra mile in every way to make sure that the programs I have been describing get executed.”

When “the pandemic hit in March,” Muir continued, “60 percent of our volume was at risk” because of restaurant closures. “I grabbed my team and said we’ve got to figure out a way to move foodservice potatoes through retail. We got creative, and within days were turning things around. At the end of the day, we did pull that foodservice volume through retail. We got record farm gate revenue at the end of the year, and we moved all of the potatoes out of the cellar. What could have been a total disaster ended up being a huge success story for the Idaho potato industry,” he said.

Muir said he has no specific plans “at this stage” for what he will do following retirement, saying only, “There will be other opportunities for me to either serve in my church or in other capacities.” He expects it will be several months before his successor at the IPC is announced.

Photo: Frank Muir at a food festival circa 2009 with Mr. Food (Art Ginsberg), a spokesperson for Idaho potatoes, and Food Network celebrity Rachel Ray.

[Print](#)