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Northern Plains Potato Growers Association celebrates 75

years

By

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The Northern Plains Potato Growers Association is celebrating its 75th Anniversary in 2021. To help celebrate, it's bringing back the Red River Red, a mascot created way back in 1950 to promote Red River Valley Red Potatoes.

It was back in 1946 when a group of concerned potato growers joined together and started the NPPGA, representing the interests of the third-largest potato-growing region in the U.S.

Today, the association is comprised of roughly 200 grower-members from both sides of the Red River, with the Red River Valley being the largest red potato producing region in the country.

The NPPGA serves the potato industry throughout all of North Dakota and northwest Minnesota through funding research and providing legislative, operational and marketing support. Its growers produce potatoes for four distinct markets: frozen processing, fresh market, potato chips and certified seed.

"We also review and conduct research," said Ted Kreis, marketing director for the East Grand Forks, MN-based association. "Another portion of what we do involves advocacy. Donavon Johnson is our president and works with the National Potato Council on national issues."

One of the ways that the NPPGA helps its members is to make them aware of programs that can help when problems arise, be it COVID-19 issues, crop insurance issues or other things they might need government assistance on.

For instance, Johnson works to advocate for everything from transportation issues to global markets and things that growers are concerned with.

"In the marketing department, I piggyback a lot of the programs with Potatoes USA," Kreis said. "So, we're a conduit between some of these national organizations and our growers specific to this area."

It's been a dry summer in the Red River Valley, and that is expected to cut into yields for 2021, especially for the non-irrigated crops.

"The yield losses are going to be the fresh crop," Kreis said. "We have gotten a more level weather pattern the past month, so we have caught up a little, but we're still about eight inches below normal. The recent rains will help for some of the later varieties."

The Red River Valley was once home to more than 100 facilities washing and packing red potatoes, but that has diversified into different segments of potatoes through the years.

“The red potato is still the backbone of the industry as far as tradition and what makes us unique,” Kreis said. “We have heavy black soil up here, so when it rains, it holds the moisture in the ground for a long time. Our potatoes are known to have a deeper red color than a lot of other areas.”

Many of the red potato growers have been getting into growing yellow potatoes more recently, as the demand for the category has increased.

“About 25 percent of our fresh crop this year will be yellow, while 10 years ago that was probably closer to 5 percent,” Kreis said. “The last decade has really seen a large increase in yellow potato production.”

The NPPGA would like to see retail prices more closely connected with the cost of the product they are buying, which would help growers. To help retailers, the association does its part on social media and at trade shows to highlight the unique aspects of potatoes from the area.

“It’s difficult for us to target consumers because 90 percent of potatoes that are sold out of the Red River Valley at retail are not even identified as coming from here because just about every major chain has its own private label,” Kreis said. “So, branding is really a hard thing for us to accomplish, so we target wholesale.”

With 75 years behind it, the NPPGA is lauded for the great work it has accomplished in helping its members.

Photo: Ted Kreis

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