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NoKota Packers offering yellow potatoes for first time in 2021

By

Keith Loria

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NoKota Packers Inc., exclusively packs potatoes, with a typical year washing out over 500,000 cwt, which is approximately 2,500 acres. The company has been packing and shipping potatoes since 1979.

“We have completed numerous updates by adding on storage, updating packing and grading lines and made many other improvements since we began,” said Carissa Olsen, president and CEO of the Buxton, ND-based company.

Besides structural and production updates, the evolution of sales, human resources and food safety have change dramatically and the company has worked hard to keep up to date in these areas as well.



“Focusing on our motto — Quality, Integrity and Service — has allowed us to continue in this industry,” Olsen said. “We strive to bring a quality product to the marketplace by maintaining integrity and providing unbeatable service. The ability to continue to be innovative and being willing to change with industry needs is also a key component.”

Even still, the past two years have been a struggle. Due to harvest conditions in 2019, NoKota had a short crop. When COVID-19 hit in the spring of 2020, the company was just about done shipping.

“That was good, as our employee count goes down considerably so it made it easier to keep our people social distanced and safe at work,” Olsen said. “When we started up again in the fall, we had precautions in place and had minimal incidents throughout the season. 2021 brought on another difficult season with drought conditions throughout the spring and summer. While many of the areas are seeing better yields than expected, we have multiple acres that will be below average in yield.”

The quality does look good overall so that is a plus, and something NoKota is happy about going into the end of 2021.

“We will be offering some yellows this season, which is new to NoKota, and will be determining what the right mix of offering two colors will be going forward,” Olsen said.

Other challenges exist as well, including the increasing freight rates and the decline in availability of trucks to haul loads.

“The labor and truck shortages continue to impact our business,” Olsen said. “While we have a top-notch full-time crew and wonderful returning seasonal employees, we still depend on additional workers to run the washplant. It has become increasingly harder each year to fill the positions we have available.”

Working in the Red River Valley, the company believes there are things that could be done to better

highlight potatoes as a nutritious and versatile item.

“While they are a popular item with consumers, we believe there are a lot of facts people aren’t familiar with,” Olsen said. “Through our Fresh Solutions Network, we are continuously looking for ways to offer specialty items and convenient packaging to appeal to the consumer. Over the last couple of years, we have been working on promoting Side Delights, an exclusive brand of FSN, on social media.”

After 42 years of ownership, the Tweten family decided to sell their shares of ownership in NoKota. The remaining shareholders, Ron Gjelsness, Tim Lee, Kendall Gjelsness and NoKota have purchased all shares. However, it will be business as usual moving forward with Olsen continuing as president and CEO and Mike Rerick and Steve Johnson running things in the sales department.

Elsewhere, Christopher Gjelsness has taken on the role of transportation and warehouse manager after the retirement of his father, Ron Gjelsness, who is the son of the late Maurice Gjelsness, co-founder of NoKota Packers.

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