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**Wilcox Fresh navigating various challenges with this year's potato crop**

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By

John Groh, publisher

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Like many potato growers in Idaho, [Wilcox Fresh](#) is uncertain at this point what the season will bring. But one thing is certain — it has been a year like no other in recent memory.

“We’re basically in a wait-and-see situation with volume, and we’re hoping that yields aren’t too far off last year,” said Derek Peterson, vice president of sales and operations for the Rexburg, ID-based grower-shipper.

Peterson said on Sept. 13 that eastern Idaho had just recorded its hottest day of the year the previous week, which was indicative of the prolonged heat that gripped the region this summer.

“We had steady heat from July into September, and you really need the cool nights to help the potatoes bulk up, and we didn’t get that,” he said. “As a result, we’re not getting the sizing we would normally expect. We have a higher tuber count, but smaller sizes.”

He said Wilcox typically has larger sizes for retail customers, but people will have to adapt to what is available this year. Still, he said, Wilcox will have sizes across the spectrum, just not in the volumes of other years.

Peterson said in all his years as a potato grower, he has not seen a situation quite like this year.

“This is an historic season for many factors,” he said.

First, Peterson said the weather, with a cool and wet spring combined with the aforementioned extreme summer heat conspired to disrupt the growing cycle.

He added that high inflation has spiked demand on potatoes at retail, as people look for the best deals to extend their buying power.

“Potatoes are the cheapest food per pound in the produce department, so they really provide a good value to consumers looking to stretch their dollars,” he said.

Finally, he said inflation on the production side has challenged growers to become more focused on cost.

“Inflation on the supply end really drove our costs up,” he said. “We saw increases between 40 percent and 150 percent on various inputs and fuel. This has also caused some reluctance on the part of growers, who are hesitant to get too long on potatoes since the market could correct at any time.”

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On the positive side, Peterson said early digs have revealed that quality is outstanding on potatoes, with a high percentage of No. 1s.

At this point, with three weeks still remaining on harvest of potatoes for storage, Peterson said the main focus is on managing the crop to make sure product is available for its customers for 365 days.

[John Groh](#)

About John Groh | 

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John Groh graduated from the University of San Diego in 1989 with a bachelors of arts degree in English. Following a brief stint as a sportswriter covering the New York Giants football team, he joined The Produce News in 1996 as an assistant editor and worked his way up the ranks, becoming publisher in 2006. He and his wife, Mary Anne, live in northern New Jersey in the suburbs of New York City.

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