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Higher quality, lower acreage for this year's Idaho russet crop

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Quality over quantity is the watchword for the 2022 russet crop in Idaho, as growers grappled with increased input costs and weather challenges that led to fewer acres being planted.

“The potato quality looks amazing this year — maybe the best in recent memory,” said Travis Blacker, vice president of industry relations and research for the [Idaho Potato Commission](#). “I’ve heard from growers all over the state that they are really impressed with the potatoes they dug during this year’s harvest.”

More than 90 percent of Idaho’s potato growing acreage produces trademark russet varieties like Burbank, Norkotah, Ranger, and Western, and 40 percent of the state’s spuds are sold in the fresh market. With 59 percent of fresh potato volume share, according to IRI data, russets are by far the most popular potato purchase for tuber-loving shoppers.

Higher growing costs

About 295,000 acres of potatoes were harvested in Idaho in 2022 — roughly 25,000 fewer acres than in 2021 — mainly because of crop production cost increases that have been hitting farmers across the board, said Blacker.

“Input costs for potatoes were quite expensive this year because of everything that’s going on in the world,” he said. “Fertilizer and fuel prices are skyrocketing, machinery repair costs have jumped as much as 25 percent or more in the past year, and Idaho’s low unemployment rate has boosted labor costs. We also had some growers who were concerned about water supply after last year’s dry winter, and they were forced to grow less water-intensive crops this year.”

Although Blacker predicted that input costs will remain high, he sees the amount of growing acreage bouncing back for next year. “The demand for potatoes is just phenomenal right now,” he said, encouraging buyers to have a conversation about supply levels with their Idaho shipper or distributor/wholesaler/repacker to avoid missing out on potential potato sales.

Planning ahead

This year, it will be more important than ever to plan ahead with Idaho shippers to ensure an ample supply for promotions, advised Blacker. “Idaho shippers are committed to their customers, but potato supplies will be tight throughout the season,” he said, mainly due to the elevated demand for fresh potatoes in the processing sector.

“One of the great stories that still needs to be understood in the industry is how sustainable our Idaho® potato ecosystem is,” said Blacker. “If we have potatoes that don’t meet our strict marketing order and quality standards, we have other avenues to utilize those potatoes. This is one of the reasons our shippers agree to the strictest potato marketing order in the country. If Idaho® potatoes don’t meet grade, they can still be utilized to make dehydrated instant potatoes.”

Blacker said Idaho farmers have welcomed the increased demand for potatoes and have been using their profits to put money back into their businesses. “I don’t know of any Idaho shippers that are not undergoing some sort of automation in their factories to help improve quality and consistency in the

products they deliver,” said Blacker, who visits with different Idaho family farms throughout the year.

Pricing opportunities

With overall food costs shooting upward, retailers have an opportunity to capture some long overdue price gains for top-quality Idaho® potatoes, said Ross Johnson, IPC vice president of retail and international. Food and beverage prices were about 13.3 percent higher year over year for the five weeks ended Oct. 2, according to a recent report from IRI, so consumers are already factoring inflation into their grocery budgets.

“The cost of everything is up right now, including potatoes,” said Johnson. “And Idaho russets are particularly well-positioned for price hikes, because IPC data analysis shows that price elasticity for Idaho® potatoes is much lower than for potatoes from other growing regions. This means that when the Idaho potato price goes up, the change in consumer demand is significantly less for Idaho branded potatoes than for non-Idaho® potatoes.”

Blacker said he has had the opportunity to watch how Idaho farmers confronted numerous big changes in a short amount of time. “When you consider all the industry dynamics — fertilizer prices, weather conditions, increased labor costs, increased material costs, just to name a few — you really have to be impressed with how the Idaho potato farmer has weathered them,” he said. “Many people think a farmer’s job is easy. But when you work directly with farmers as I do, you gain a deep appreciation for their ability to meet challenges and produce a high-quality crop year after year.”

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