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**Potato industry celebrates increased access to Mexican market**

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By

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Two years after the interior Mexican market opened for U.S. potato exports, industry experts provided a breakdown of what was involved with gaining increased access to that important market and discussed plans to further develop business south of the border.

A panel comprised of National Potato Council CEO Kam Quarles, consultant Matt Lantz of Bryant Christie Inc., and Kim Breshears of Potatoes USA convened during the recent Potato Expo in Austin, TX, providing background for the issue and a framework to move forward.

Quarles said that two short years ago, Mexico was an incredibly disputed market for potatoes, mired in political gamesmanship.

Yet the U.S. industry was resilient and continued to push for the increased access beyond the 26-kilometer border region.

“We thought we would be stuck with no market access in Mexico,” he said, “but we kept pushing and were fortunate that the battle that reached the Mexican Supreme Court went our way.”

He credited the “fantastic team we have in Mexico, especially on the legal and regulatory front,” and said the effort was ultimately successful when the U.S. tied it to exports coming north to the United States. “Prior to that, we didn’t have much leverage in Mexico.”

Lantz, who is the lead on trade policy issues at Bryant Christie and who specializes in opening foreign markets for U.S. agricultural commodities, said the border region was first opened to U.S. potato shipments in 2003, with hopes to broaden access the following year. “But we found ourselves continuing to negotiate this issue for the next 10-15 years,” he said. “Mexico has a grower group that is dedicated to blocking our access using phytosanitary and legal claims.”

Lantz said that the U.S. eventually hired attorneys in Mexico to advocate for the cause, and in April of 2021 the Supreme Court in Mexico ruled unanimously in favor of increased access for the United States, with shipments to the interior commencing in May 2022.

“We now have two separate agreements that allow access to the border, and beyond,” he said. “However, the grower group is still very much opposed to us and is always looking for ways to come after us, so we need to continue to work hard to make sure we are in compliance.”

That said, Lantz added that the Mexican government has come to accept that “we have access to the market, and they are now no longer secretly changing the rules.”

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Breshears, who is chief marketing officer at Potatoes USA, said her organization is charged with growing the Mexican market, and it has a good framework in place to do so.

“We have in-country reps who have well-established relationships, so when access was granted we had a great start,” she said. “We also work with Mexican retailers and that has expanded from wholesalers and warehouses to mainstream retailers. Our next step is to work with chefs and foodservice in Mexico.”

Another important aspect, according to Breshears, was the fact that the U.S. had a smaller crop the last couple of years, “so we were not flooding the market and it allowed us to ramp up gradually.”

Breshears said that exports to Mexico are starting to increase, and with that it is important to educate Mexican consumers about the varieties available from the U.S.

“We are working with the retail community in Mexico to make that happen,” she said. “Along with offering information on our varieties and how to use them, we are working with influencers and developing content on recipes. We are finding that once [consumers] taste the product, they see the value that we offer.”

A question from the audience was posed inquiring about the similarities and differences of avocados, which also was a disputed commodity between the U.S. and Mexico 25 years ago.

Quarles said when full access was granted for Mexican avocado shipments to the U.S., “it actually created more demand [for avocados] and we feel it will be the same for potatoes in Mexico.”

He added that another similarity between avocados and potatoes was the industry cooperation that was required to open each market.

Breshears said, “We are not looking to replace Mexican potatoes, but rather supplement the domestic market with our potatoes. There is a lot of unmet demand in Mexico.”

Moving forward, Lantz stressed the need to stay the course and exercise caution with shipments destined for Mexico.

“The more we work on this and gain further acceptance, the better off we will be,” he said. “We need to go slow and steady and continue to build relationships — and keep the product clean. The quickest way for us to lose access is pests. If we ship loads with high pest counts, audits will increase and we will be under scrutiny. We need to continue to work hard and be diligent about phytosanitary regulations. But I truly believe this has the potential to change the face of the U.S. potato industry.”

Quarles added that if there is a pest find, the most important thing is to trace it back to the field so it can be isolated and not trigger a widespread moratorium on shipments.

“Last year Mexico was our largest import partner, and we believe it will eventually be our largest trading partner,” said Quarles.

*Photo: Matt Lantz spoke about the work that was undertaken to expand access for U.S. potatoes in Mexico during a session held at Potato Expo in Austin, TX. Also on the panel were Kam Quarles, CEO of the National Potato Council, and Kim Breshears, chief marketing officer of Potatoes USA.*

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**About John Groh** | 

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 1995 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.

