

WASHINGTON STATE POTATO COMMISSION
CURRENT PROGRAM & INDUSTRY REVIEW

by
Kevin Bouchey
Grower & Commissioner
Toppenish

As potato growers in the State of Washington, we are now facing unprecedented production challenges.

As fresh growers, we are expected to grow potatoes for the marketplace that are uniform, shapely in appearance, free from internal and external defects, ship and store well, as well as taste good. As processed growers, we are expected to grow potatoes that are defect free, high in solids, and make a quality finished product.

All this is at a time when production is more difficult. We are now faced with environmental concerns that are impacting all aspects of our operations. Urbanites who are making the rules have no experience or exposure to farming as a business. This scenario is likely to get worse in light of the administration changes at both the state and federal level.

These are reasons why it is important to stay current on important issues and production problems both as a grower as well as a state organization.

Did you know that as Washington State potato growers, we spend more dollars on research than any other potato producing state? As growers, we are currently funding projects in the following areas:

- Nematode Control
- Bio Control of Insects
- Improved Post-Harvest Quality
- Improved Tuber Handling
- Disease Resistance
- Potato Performance
- Variety Development
- Internal Brown Spot
- Genetic Engineering Methods

However, few growers realize the time and effort required to maintain a productive and successful research program. Also few growers realize that they can participate in the fundamental stages of our program. Once every two years our commission holds a potato problems forum. This forum provides the opportunity for growers to identify their respective production problems.

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These areas of potential research are then passed on to researchers at both Washington State University and the USDA/ARS. Researchers then submit project proposals addressing these research needs. The projects are reviewed extensively by our commission and then only those best suited to the needs of the growers are then funded.

Your research dollars through the WSPC are not your only source of research information, however. Our co-operation through the National Potato Council have secured many hundreds of thousands of dollars for specific potato research in the past several years. The dollars are above the general research funds granted through the USDA/ARS each year.

One uniquely funded project by the USDA/ARS is the TRI-STATE Research Council. This is a co-operative effort of the states of Washington, Oregon, and Idaho in potato varietal development. To date, three varieties have been released for commercial production:

Gemchip - 1989
Frontier Russet - 1990
Ranger Russet - 1991

Another beneficial area of research to Washington State Growers is the sharing of information among other potato producing states.

Finally, private sector research has now become an important area of the potato industry. Companies such as Monsanto are now conducting genetic breeding of selected vegetables, including potatoes.

As you can see, much attention is given to research. However, in my opinion, if the useable results do not get to the growers of Washington State, then the research is useless. Thus it becomes the responsibility of your commission to get you this information.

The annual potato conference, as well as Spud Topics and the Grower Handbook are some of the best vehicles to get you this information. In addition, your commission also co-sponsors numerous potato production workshops across the state in conjunction with the WSU Extension Agents.

The other main function of your commission is advertising.

Why advertise? I've heard the question many times. With over 80% of Washington State production as processed product, we don't need to advertise, let's let the processors do all the advertising.

Well, I don't believe this philosophy is in the best interest of the growers. While I firmly believe we need a good working relationship between the growers and the processors, it is also in our best interest to have a vested interest in the advertising and market development of Washington State potatoes.

With the fluctuations of acreage and production in our state from year to year, it is very important to maintain a strong presence in the fresh market. Although this represents a minority of production, the fresh market is always there in time of need.

In addition to fresh market advertising, your commission is also committed to processed potato promotion as well.

One of the areas of promotion is the school food services. This market is very important to the processed industry as well as fresh usage with the implementation of potato bars. With the number of school food meals, both lunch and breakfast continuing to rise, our continued presence is needed to maintain and expand our position.

We, as a commission also continue to promote Washington potato products through the retail and restaurant industry as well as wholesale markets.

One of the best selling points, in addition to our quality, is our nutritional advantage. Consequently we are continuing to sponsor marathon races such as the Los Angeles Marathon to promote the health benefits of the Washington Potato. As a world class wheelchair athlete, Jim Knaub continues to be the spokesperson for Washington Potatoes.

Your commission is also taking the lead in developing markets such as in the Pacific Rim. While the development has been slow, this area continues to show potential with increased consumption of both processed and fresh potato products.

Trade barriers and tariffs continue to be a roadblock for Washington potatoes around the world. Our affiliation with the Northwest Trade and Tariff Association provides us an opportunity to address and hopefully solve these market barriers.

As you can see, your commission of thirteen growers from across the state, along with a dedicated staff, is addressing your needs as a grower now as well as looking into the future. But your commission is only as good as the input provided by you as a grower. I strongly encourage you to participate in our industry functions as well as the regular commission meetings to voice your opinions and concerns.