

Higher expenses put farmers at disadvantage

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In Donnie Heaton's Tulelake storage shed, last year's crop of Norkodas is storing nicely, waiting for the cooperative packing shed, Circle C Marketing, to use them to fill orders.

The rough, brown-skinned spuds will keep the packing shed going for a while longer. This year's water uncertainty has driven Heaton and other potato producers out of the Klamath Reclamation Project.

Row crops like potatoes need water throughout the growing season. This year's drought means farmers in the Project can't count on getting water where they need it, when they need it.

Leaving the Project for land with well connections is driving up the cost of doing business. Heaton doesn't know whether he will be able to make a profit this year, but he will still fulfill his contract.

Circle C Marketing is small, Heaton says, representing about 10 producers. He knows of at least two co-op members who aren't planning to plant potatoes this year.

"They don't know if the market is going to be good or not."

The added expense of production this year will put Klamath Basin farmers at a disadvantage to potato producers in Idaho and Washington. Keeping the packing shed working and meeting the contracts is important to Heaton, because to lose them would mean the customers would go elsewhere.

"What we're trying to do is maintain our acreage bases and our customer share," Heaton says. "The only way you get your customer share back is to sell (your potatoes) for nothing."

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