

Growers scramble to find acreage to grow specialty potatoes

By JILL AHO

H&N Staff Writer

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H&N photo by Andrew Mariman Dan Chin of Wong Potatoes examines ground that will be used to grow the Klamath Basin Fresh Direct cooperative marketing group's organic and specialty potatoes. Because land outside the Basin is being used to grow the crop, producers worry the potato could look different.

Last year, cooperative marketing group Klamath Basin Fresh Direct received exclusive rights to market the Purple Pelisse potato, renamed by the group the Purple Passion.

The antioxidant-rich purple fingerling represents the work that the marketing group and Wong Potatoes owner Dan Chin have done in recent years to carve themselves a niche.

Chin, who serves as chairman of the 45-grower group, has traveled to Asia to promote the specialty and organic potatoes. He's made inroads to get the organic Klamath Pearl in national stores and worked to associate high-quality specialty potatoes with the Klamath Basin.

However, the drought situation this year could threaten that progress.

Organic lands served by adequate water supplies are harder to find than conventional ground, and without a consistent supply of those products, the marketing work could be lost, Chin says.

“It’s put a big dent in (organic production),” he says. “We have had to look to other areas for some organic (land) that has a good water source or well water source. The ground is harder to find than conventional ground, for the most part.”

Chin has had to rent ground near Burney and Swan Lake in California, more than 120 miles from his Merrill-area operation.

The specialty spuds already garner a premium price in stores, and Chin says even though production costs are going to increase because of distance to farmlands, he doesn’t know whether consumers will pay more for the potatoes.

“Realistically, we’re probably not going to be able to charge much more than we’ve been charging,” he says. “We’re probably going to be taking less for our product than we would normally.”

Chin also worries the potatoes will be different from what the Klamath Basin ground would produce. He’s sold retailers on the varieties and the superior quality of potatoes grown in the Basin, and this year he can’t predict what the potatoes will look like. The quality of the ground and the weather can change their color, taste and appearance.

“If you’re going to a place like Burney, is the produce going to be different? It’s different than the Klamath Basin, for sure,” Chin says. “We feel we’ve worked hard to try to find ground we can produce in, so I think we’re going to be OK. It’s going to be a learning curve for us as managers to produce a good crop.”

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