

High-Cost ID Potato Harvest Is a Wrap

Idaho's High-Quality, High-Cost Potato Harvest Goes to the Cellar

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By **Dan Miller**, Progressive Farmer Senior Editor



Idaho Russet Burbank potatoes are loaded into storage cellars nearly a football field in length where they are stored under closely monitored temperatures and humidity levels. (DTN photo by Dan Miller)

BURLEY, Idaho (DTN) -- The end of the Idaho potato harvest was in view when DTN/Progressive Farmer visited an acreage not far from Burley, Idaho, a community on the Snake River in south-central Idaho and about 40 miles east of Twin Falls.

"This is where the potato that goes with your steak comes from," said Russell Patterson, as he stood behind a windrower digging Russet Burbank potatoes from long rows. The Idaho native has been in the potato business for 55 years, growing the crop and leasing land to other growers.

Patterson also owns 15 potato cellars, Quonset-type buildings that store the harvest for a year at a time until buyers remove them. These are high-tech buildings, 260 feet long and 60 feet wide, with temperature and humidity closely controlled. Systems are in place to monitor for spoilage that would otherwise spread into the pile.

Potatoes bound for the fryer are stored at 47 degrees Fahrenheit to produce a light-colored fry. "Any colder, the starches turn to sugar and the result is a dark fry," Patterson explained. Fresh potatoes are stored at about 40-42 degrees.

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Each cellar holds 100,000 cwt (about 100 pounds per hundredweight). That's enough to fill 1 million 10-pound bags. About half the Idaho potato crop is sold for processing.

Potatoes are a high-cost, water-thirsty crop. Input costs for contract potato growers this year are \$3,500 to \$4,000 per acre. That's compared to \$2,200 to \$2,400 in 2020.

Water is an all-the-time concern, Patterson said. Water to irrigate potatoes is delivered through miles of pipe delivering pumped groundwater and more significantly, from an enormous system of 40-foot-deep canals. The canals were dug into rock layers by steam shovels and dynamite more than 100 years ago. Huge piles of black spoil still line their banks. Snake River water flows into these canals. Water deliveries to the Idaho crop have been reduced in 2022, with available supplies affected by drought and a limited snowpack up in the Grand Tetons.

The Idaho potato crop is predicted to be down 25,000 acres this year, an 8% to 10% decline from 2021. Potatoes were planted on about 290,000 acres this year, reports say. Some of those former potato acres were planted instead to wheat and barley. Both are lower-cost crops and require less water. It should be noted, however, that there is an expectation in Idaho of a higher-quality potato harvest (compared to 2021), with final production in line with the state's three-year average.

In response, French fry processors agreed to pay Idaho growers about 20% more this year than in 2021. While that seems significant, not every grower receives that increase, and it will not offset high production costs. Processors set the price contract growers receive.

The price paid to the farmer generally is about 20% of the retail price. "That's the law of supply and demand and (processor) control," Patterson said.

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Check out a video of the harvest at <https://www.dtnpf.com/...> The potato harvest is almost entirely mechanized. The first machine in the video is a potato windrower digging Russet Burbank spuds. The next machine is a potato harvester loading the crop into trucks. Trucks deliver potatoes to a cellar location where they are loaded into long Quonset-style buildings and stored for about a year.

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