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Idaho potato industry gets $515,000 in block grants

By John O'Connell

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John O'Connell/Capital Press

A potato field flowers in Pocatello, Idaho on July 8. The Idaho potato industry was recently awarded about $515,000 in specialty crop block grants toward four research projects.

The Idaho potato industry has received $515,000 in specialty crop block grant funding for four projects.

BOISE, Idaho — The Idaho State Department of Agriculture has awarded the state's potato industry $515,000 in specialty crop block grant funding, covering four research projects.

Chosen projects aim to better understand the chemistry of new fry oil blends, develop potato varieties with resistance to zebra chip disease, identify molecular markers for potato virus Y resistance and promote Idaho potatoes in developing markets.

Idaho agriculture benefited from a record $1.72 million in specialty crop block grant funds this year, covering 19 projects. The funding originates from the federal government, and USDA must still approve ISDA's choices.

Pat Kole, the Idaho Potato Commission's vice president of legal and government affairs, said roughly the same amount of block grant money was allocated for spud research as last year. On July 8, Kole and other Pacific Northwest potato industry leaders were in Washington, D.C., where they met with elected officials to express the importance of the funded projects.

"It's definitely a good year, and it's definitely very much appreciated. It will make a very significant difference to the potato industry to have these projects funded," Kole said.

Boise State University chemistry professor Owen McDougal received nearly $156,000 for a year-long project to develop a rapid method of testing fry oil composition and quality, which can affect fry flavor. He'll use infrared spectrophotometry, a technology that uses light to detect the presence of oil decomposition products.

McDougal explained the industry has moved toward oils that are less conducive to the formation of trans fats, but the chemistry of their decomposition over time is not yet well understood.

"All of the established (testing) methods were created on different oil blends from what is currently being used," McDougal said.

Oil is more costly than the fries themselves, so the food service industry seeks to use it for as long as possible, he said. McDougal hopes the project will get BSU's "foot in the door" to fill a niche of partnering in food chemistry research.

University of Idaho virologist Alex Karasev is working to develop molecular markers for potato virus Y resistance with a $149,000 grant, covering two years. Karasev said resistance genes have been identified in Yukon Gem and a few other cultivars, and his project will focus on strains of PVY that cause necrosis in tubers.

Another UI project received $95,000 to investigate new approaches to developing potato lines with resistance to zebra chip, a relatively new disease in the Pacific Northwest that creates bands in tuber flesh that darken when fried.

IPC received about $115,000 to continue efforts to raise awareness about the Idaho potato brand in developing markets. Traci Hiebert, IPC's international marketing director, intends to emphasize Mexico, Puerto Rico, Central American countries including Guatemala, El Salvador, Colombia and Panama and Asian countries such as Taiwan, Malaysia and Hong Kong.

Hiebert hopes to conduct promotions similar to IPC's Potato Lovers Month campaign in the foreign markets, attend foreign trade shows more frequently, do more menu promotions with foreign food service businesses and work with foreign chefs on recipe development.

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