

# The Potato Minute

July 1, 2020



## EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR REPORT - Terence Hochstein

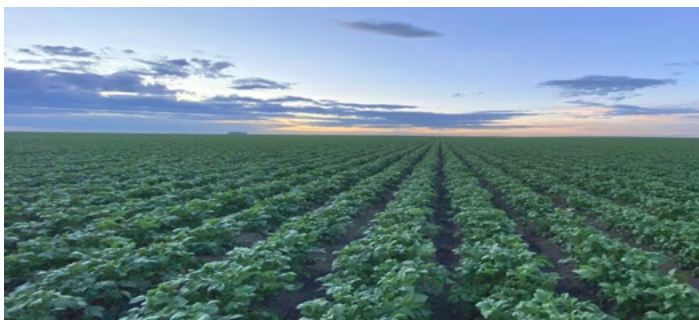


Happy Canada Day! What have you been doing for the past 16 weeks...where to start!

Since early March almost everything that we would call a normal part of our everyday life, no matter what we do for a living or where we called home, has changed. Some folks would say that this whole COVID 19 was a conspiracy, some would call it a time out, others don't have an opinion. Either way, many of the things that we took for granted are now under the microscope, with no conclusive evidence to say one way or another what is happening around the globe.

In the potato industry every day is a new day, every day has a new challenge, some good and some not so good. Back in mid-March the Alberta growers went from a shortage of seed potatoes and a processing industry that would just sneak under the wire with enough crop to finish off the 2019 crop year. Then things changed around the world and our seed shortage turned into a seed oversupply, with no options as to where to send the excess. We are all aware that most of this excess ended up in various other streams that were never the intended use. Somewhere in rural Alberta we have some very happy worms! For a while our process growers were looking at 90,000 tons of 2019 crop with nowhere to go with them. The processors were shut down, their freezers were full, the fresh industry couldn't handle any more, our dehy plant was running at capacity and we were running out of time. As the world struggled to find a balance of what was and what will be, people continued to adjust and that has brought us to today. Through some creative cooperation from the growers, industry, the public, and many more new opportunities, the processing potatoes have found new homes and with any luck we will finish off the 2019 crop year with empty storages and a renewed optimism for the 2020 crop.

Right now, the 2020 processing crop is coming along quite well, albeit there have been some setbacks since planting.



An early June hailstorm in the Barnwell/Cranford area has set about 2500 acres of potatoes back. It was early enough in the season that most of the crop will recover to make potatoes. Last Saturday's hail storm that hit the Bow Island area, may not have the same results. Our seed growers in the North are once again battling Mother Nature, with some growers saying that it is wetter than last summer, and it is only early July. Hopefully the tides will turn and allow our seed growers to harvest a respectable crop.



Through all of this uncertainty, we sometimes overlook what makes this industry such a wonderful group to be involved in. One of the greatest strengths of the potato industry across the country is that we are all one big family. Every area has some direct family connections, but it goes even farther than that. ***We all work together, from coast to coast on a regular basis, for the common good of the industry,*** and as such, we spend a lot of time getting to know each other's families and what each of us do. When tragedy hits, a small piece of all of us is affected. On Friday June 12th, Brenda Simmons, PEI Potato Board Assistant General Manager, one of our industry leaders, lost her 27-year-old son, Jake, in a senseless traffic accident, while riding his bike in rural PEI. The loss of any family member, let alone one of your children, is a devastating tragedy. Jake was part of the family farm, working alongside his father and mother, as a member of the succession plan of their family farm. This one has a personal connection to me as Brenda was our youngest daughter's surrogate mother for the 4 years that she attended UPEI.

As we embrace each day, always remember to reflect on what keeps this industry successful, our immediate family, our industry family, our work family. Everything we do on a daily basis has some sort of affect on people that we don't necessarily always think of. Rest in peace Jacob Simmons.

*Until next month.*

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## SEED COORDINATOR UPDATE- Stacey Bajema

Thank you to all the growers for promptly getting in their planting information and responding to our requests for information over the past while. With the ongoing COVID saga, and it's effects on our industry, it has been especially pertinent for us to have detailed accurate information.

### Washington State Commercial Seed Trials 2020

The Washington State Commercial Seed Lot Trials did go ahead this year, although the WSU potato field day was canceled due to 2019 Washington State University COVID-19. Seed Lot Commercial Seed Trials Ratings were released on June 19 and the PGA has sent our participating Alberta seed growers their results by email. Growers down south are still able to visit the site between June 22 and July 2 to view the lots in person, although with border restrictions still in place, our Alberta seed growers missed the opportunity to connect



with their customers face to face. We hopefully look forward to attending this event in 2021, as it is a great opportunity to connect and build relationships with the potato community down south.

### CFIA Reminder

Please remember to confirm your seed lots for PCN testing with your CFIA inspectors.

### Tyvek Bag Tags

In preparation for the upcoming Post Harvest Test, I will be ordering some more Tyvek Bag Tags this month. If any of our growers would like to order some as well, please text or email me with your request and I will add it to the total order.

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Left: Greenroad Farms showing root system of early potato plant Right: High generation seed field at Great North Seed Potatoes in northern Alberta



## AGRICULTURAL DIRECTOR - Thomas McDade

There continues to be a lot of great work being done in agricultural research in Southern Alberta, even though it seems like the World has stopped turning during the pandemic. A few highlights from the last few months are:

### News from Lethbridge College – Agriculture Technology Centre:

Lethbridge College is ready to help the agriculture industry after receiving one of the most significant applied research grants in the college's history. The college was awarded one of just six new Technology Access Centers (TAC) across Canada by the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC) on Tuesday.

The \$1.75 million five-year renewable grant will be used to create the Integrated Agriculture Technology Centre (IATC), which will help farmers, growers and food processors across the country tap into the latest research and recognized expertise at the college.

"This announcement is extremely significant and welcome news," says Dr. Paula Burns, Lethbridge College President and CEO. "It signifies to Canada's agriculture industry that we are here to support their needs and find solutions to the challenges they face. The Integrated Agriculture Technology Centre will help to drive forward one of the country's most important industries and provide a boost to the provincial economy."

The IATC will offer clients from across the agriculture industry - including large and small-scale crop producers, greenhouse growers, aquaculture operations, food processors, and ag-tech companies - access to applied research and development, technical services and consulting and training and education, with a focus on the college's core research areas of aquaculture, crop production and wet processing.

### Research activities at the University of Lethbridge:

The University of Lethbridge campus has been quiet since March, with most employees working remotely from home. There is one exception, though, the Potato Research Lab. Our lab completed all required safety trainings and is among the very few lucky ones that were granted permission to continue critical research under current COVID-19 restrictions.

The new season of the Pest Monitoring Program had started in May. This is our 2nd season of the program on campus, and we feel comfortable and confident in our results. As always in science, we are striving for perfection. As a result, we are working on improvements of morphological identification of *Phytophthora infestans* spores under microscope, recording each spore image, and validating protocols for molecular

diagnostics. We anticipate to soon receive a new Zeiss microscope camera that will help us to get higher resolution images of the spores. Andrea and Brendon are involved in diagnostics of spore trap samples, whereas Dylan and Becky are analyzing yellow sticky cards for the potato psyllids and some other potato pests.



Top L-R Andrea Abenoja, Brendon DeGroot. Bottom L-R: Dylan Jones, Beck Davidson - U of L students



Among other news, Andrea got 2nd place in poster competition at the 6th Annual Undergraduate Research in Science Conference of Alberta (URSCA) that was hosted online by the U of L. This was her Independent Study on potato tissue culture.

The soil samples in CanPEDNet were collected in April-May and sent for *Verticillium* and nematode analyses to the designated labs in New Brunswick and PEI. We hope to receive the results back next month. Have a great summer!

One last note, the new variety trials in Brooks is a go for this year, and planting was done in late May. Although we will probably not be able to have a field day, as we have in the past, the results of the variety trials will be made available online.

Thanks and have a great July! Take some time to do something fun, as we all need to relax from a stressful and challenging spring.

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## Alberta's Recovery Plan

An ambitious strategy to create jobs, build and diversify.

Alberta is facing an unprecedented economic crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic, global recession and world oil price collapse.

Alberta's Recovery Plan takes bold action to create jobs that get people back to work, build infrastructure and diversify our economy. We are building on our economic strengths to attract investment and position our province for prosperity. It's a plan for today that provides hope for the future.

Agriculture Supports & Forestry Protection - \$75Million:

Alberta has a hard-earned reputation for high-quality agriculture and forestry products and a growing capacity to help meet the global demand for food.

An important part of our economy, the agri-food sector contributes \$8.5 billion in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and employs nearly 73,000 Albertans.

There is tremendous opportunity to keep growing, even in a post-COVID world. We are developing an ambitious sector plan that combines existing strengths with emerging growth opportunities.

Through it, we will focus on:

- **Attracting investment to enhance our value-added processing capacity**
- **Expanding export opportunities to ensure our processors can maintain and increase access to key global markets**
- **Expanding irrigation infrastructure to increase primary production, which in turn will support a diversified value-added processing industry**
- **Ensuring the forestry industry's access to fibre to support jobs and investment by completing a review of constraints on the annual allowable cut**



For more details on the entire plan, visit...  
[alberta.ca/recovery-plan.aspx](https://alberta.ca/recovery-plan.aspx)

*Text source: alberta.ca*



# Alberta potato farmers optimistic for harvest after pandemic soiled supply lines



Potato farmer Russell Van Boom on his farm (Northbank Potato Farm) northeast of Edmonton on June 25, 2020. LARRY WONG / POSTMEDIA NETWORK

*Dylan Short -Edmonton Journal, June 30, 2020*

Alberta potato growers are banking on a healthy harvest after COVID-19 decimated their supply system this spring. Russell Van Boom, a seed potato farmer near Fort Saskatchewan, said he planted 90 per cent of his crops this year compared to last. He was anticipating slower demand come harvest time after processing plants and restaurants were temporarily closed or operating at reduced capacity to comply with health orders.

"Many of the seed farms have been left with a whole bunch of extra seed and product and we're in the middle of dumping those out in our field to be buried next week," he said in mid-June.

For Van Boom, who sells seed potatoes to potato growers, the provincial relaunch came too late to adjust how much product he could plant.

"We're going to harvest what we harvest and that's the case for both types of farmers, for seed farmers like us and for commercial farms that grow either for french fries or for fresh potatoes that you'd buy at a grocery store," he said. Terrence Hochstein, executive director of Potato Growers of Alberta, said the pandemic has cost seed potato farmers in the province between \$4.5 million and \$5 million in lost revenue. Alberta's processing industry in terms of french fry

production has decreased about 20 per cent this season compared to last, or approximately 7,500 acres.

In April, the hit to the french fry market was closer to 80 per cent while restaurants were forced to shut their doors. That decrease saw the industry urge Canadians to eat french fries at home to stop potatoes from going to waste. Hochstein said seed growers like Van Boom had to make a calculation of how hard they would get hit and plant accordingly.

"It was throwing a dart at a wall," he said. "They had to guess what to plant for this coming year because they didn't know what the demand was going to be. The decision that the seed growers made is going to affect the industry for the next three or four years."

With Alberta currently in stage two of its relaunch plan, Hochstein says potato processing plants are beginning to get back to full capacity and an increase in demand for ordering in or taking out food from restaurants has helped to offset some of the losses during the lockdown.

Van Boom agreed that restaurants beginning to open gives him cautious hope for future markets.

"How is the rest of the economy gonna unfold and how close to normal are we going to be by October of 2021, because that dictates what we do today?" he said.



### Alberta farmers donate seed potatoes to Northwest Territories in effort to promote food security

June 22, 2020 - Vanessa Quon (The Globe & Mail)

The Northern Farm Training Institute in the Northwest Territories recently received a semi-truck full of 50,000 pounds of seed potatoes from Alberta to distribute throughout the territory as part of an effort to promote food security.

The institute, located in Hay River on the southern tip of Great Slave Lake, had plans to use the potatoes to encourage northerners, including people living in one of the territory's 13 fly-in communities, to grow their own food.

Jackie Milne, president of the institute, said she tried getting help from the territorial government's Department of Industry, Tourism and Investment, which is responsible for overseeing federal funding for agriculture. She said she received no formal response.

So she reached out to the Potato Growers of Alberta, who wrote back the next day telling her that Sunnycrest Farms near Red Deer, Alta., would donate enough seed potatoes for just more than one pound a person throughout the territory, which has a population of about 45,000 people. Ms. Milne said the pandemic has underscored the need for everyone to take food shortages seriously.

"We need to make sure that the place where we live has the ability to meet our core needs so that we're not completely dependent on imports," she said. "Imports should be a supplement, not a dependency."

Ms. Milne adds that potatoes in particular are great for first-time gardeners and are easy to protect, as well as being one of the highest food-producing vegetables a square foot. Access to food is already a significant issue in the territory, where 21.7 per cent of households were considered food insecure in 2017-18, the most recent data available. That is the second-highest rate in the country, compared with nearly 12.7 per cent for Canada as a whole.

Ms. Milne said most Northern communities are already at a high risk of food shortages.

"A lot of the food we are still purchasing from our grocery stores are coming out of storage from last year's harvest. Once we go through that, the shortage of the work force is going to affect what's available next year."

That has been exacerbated by the pandemic, particularly by the territory's decision to close its boundaries to non-essential travellers, Ms. Milne said.



President of the Northern Farm Training Institute, Jackie Milne, pictured with Kim Rapati in Hay River on June 6, 2020, said she tried getting help from the territorial government's Department of Industry, Tourism and Investment but received no formal response.

"When the crisis began with COVID-19 and our border closed, I knew there would be shortages for us in the Northwest Territories because we already get shortages of the regular grocery food," Ms. Milne said.

The institute president has volunteers to help distribute the seed potatoes to different communities throughout the territory – the first batch was sent to Samba K'e in the Dehcho Region of the NWT. Other batches have been sent to Yellowknife, the Sahtu and Beaufort Delta Regions and to Fort Simpson, which will be used as a distribution point for communities in that area.

Ms. Milne said most of the seed potatoes in grocery stores in the territory are sold out. Even when they're not, grocery shoppers easily pay \$4 a pound.

It's a different story at Sunnycrest Farms, where they're dealing with a surplus of seed potatoes.

Jeff Ekkel, the farm's owner, said seed potatoes are the only excess crop they have and that the 50,000 pounds given to the NWT was only a small amount. They also distributed more of their excess seed to the cattle feed market.

"The pandemic has so far decreased the demand for potatoes, and we're a seed farm, so in turn, it decreases the demand for our seeds," Mr. Ekkel said.

Joel Holder, director of economic diversification at the Industry, Tourism and Investment Department, said the territory has the Canadian Agricultural Partnership program that provides funding to communities for resources such as seed potatoes, farming equipment and training. He said it requires a formal application.

Read full story [here...](#)

# ALBERTA OPEN FARM DAYS

**AUGUST 15 & 16TH**

**PARTICIPATING FARM:**

**CP FARMS - BARNWELL  
AUGUST 15TH**

## ACROSS THE COUNTRY



**Update June 24/20.**

The processing crop in southern Alberta was one of the first to be planted in Canada and is growing rapidly with early Rangers close to row closure. A major hailstorm in the Taber area has already wiped out about 2,000 acres but growers are hopeful on some regrowth.



Other rotational crops were damaged as well.



The northern part of the province, home to the seed growing area, has seen even wetter conditions than last year and temperatures have been very cool, in the 8-12° range. Drowned out spots have challenged emergence in some fields. 2020 acreage is not yet tallied but process acres could be 20% less than in 2019. There were no reductions observed in the seed acreage. Fresh acreage may move upwards as some growers considered shifting some acreage away from processing, given the volumes turned back by fryers this spring.

Old crop will be cleaned up. Some has had to move away from their intended market, to dehy, food banks, cattle feed, or disposal.

A significant disappointment lies with the seed industry, now faced with burying 12,000 tonnes of seed inventory, after in mid-February facing a perceived shortage of seed. The French fry manufacturers last week announced that they will now need remaining process inventory that they had earlier turned away only three months ago. In the meantime, some of that original inventory has gone for other end uses.

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Click [here](#) for updates on the remainder of the provinces



## FROM THE OFFICE



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