

Premium organic potatoes, sustainability hallmarks for Klamath Basin Fresh Direct

By LORA ABCARIAN

Klamath Basin Fresh Direct, a cooperative of 17 shareholders who came together in 2001, is moving premium organic potatoes into the pipeline during 2010. Shareholders are located in south-central Oregon and northern California in the Klamath Basin.

Because of its elevation and natural environment, the region is largely devoid of pest pressures associated with other growing regions.

Company shareholders are interested in agricultural sustainability. The majority are third- and fourth-generation family farms and agricultural-related businesses.

"Our core mission is to produce a premium organic potato while enhancing the environmental and economic stability of the rural Klamath Basin now and for future generations," the organization states on its web site.

Director of Marketing Hollis Baley said that potatoes are marketed from late September through late April. "Our growers have been having a lot of discussion about making our products available year-round," she told *The Produce News* in early November. "We may have our first year-round supply this year if we can out-source acreage in California for next year."

This season, Ms. Baley said that the organization will move 30,000 hundredweight



Klamath Basin Fresh Direct offers a variety of premium organic potatoes to its customers. Product is currently available from late September through late April. The company's shareholders are exploring the feasibility of a year-round program. (Photo courtesy of Klamath Basin Fresh Direct)

of organic Klamath Pearls as well as 36,000 hundredweight of Russian Banana, French and Ruby Crescent fingerlings. These volumes have remained relatively stable.

"The organic Purple Fiesta is our brand new purple fingerling," she said. In all, 400 hundredweight of the variety will

be moved this season.

Ms. Baley noted, "Our primary business is done with wholesalers and direct to retailers. We don't do a lot of food-service business at the moment. But are always searching for new customers as we can guarantee a quality product and consistently get

good feedback from chefs and customers."

Klamath Basin also markets approximately 5 percent of its potatoes to home delivery businesses.

The organization's potatoes are primarily marketed on the West Coast. "But we have national distribution in place

with a handful of customers," Ms. Baley added. Product is primarily transported via truck. "Railex is about 5 percent," she went on to say. "But our primary broker, Bridges Produce, is consistently searching for more Railex business."

Use of such service helps reduce transportation costs and carbon footprint, Ms. Baley said.

The company is one of the first to pack its potatoes in Ultra-Shield bags, which block 99 percent of damaging light from reaching potatoes. Because potatoes are light sensitive, they turn green after lengthy exposure. Ms. Baley was asked how customers are reacting to the new technology.

"Customers are excited about the new packaging scheme," she replied. "The artwork is brand new and just really jumps out at you. The Ultra-Shield technology is attractive to many customers as it will certainly lead to less waste."

Ms. Baley went on to say, "We package each premium organic variety in convenient 1.5-pound bags and also have a round Multicolor Medley bag and a Fingerling Medley bag as part of our product line. The front, sides and bottom of the bag are made with the lightweight plastic Ultra-Shield material while the upper back side has a small mesh portion which gives the potatoes sufficient circulation, allowing them to breathe."