

# Funds may fall short for potato growers

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FRENCHVILLE - Aroostook County growers of fresh table-stock potatoes are having a bad year - as bad as any in recent memory - and a government program to help them out may provide too little, too late for some growers to keep going after this season. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service recently made available \$750,000 in federal funds to Maine's potato growers for the safe disposal of an estimated 1.6 million hundredweight of unmarketable potatoes.

The funds are being used to encourage growers to dispose of potatoes properly by spreading them on fields before the end of March where they can freeze-dry before warm weather arrives. This prevents diseases from infecting the next crop.

The \$1.50 per hundredweight that growers receive from the program is less than one-quarter of the actual cost of raising potatoes. That cost is estimated at \$1,800 per acre, and the average yield per acre is 266 hundredweight.

Farmers are being forced to dispose of thousands of barrels of potatoes in part because of last fall's heavy rains. On top of that, the bottom dropped out of the market for fresh table-stock potatoes. This year's low may be a new record in potato sales.

There are no orders, and when some are found potatoes are refused because of pressure bruise problems. The bruising stems from last year's wet growing season.

There is also a glut of potatoes on the market. Northern Maine growers have shipped few potatoes to their normal markets this winter.

Don Flannery, executive director of the Maine Potato Board, pointed out the NRCS is not a diversion program, but one that will help get rid of potatoes that could cause disease problems for the 2004 crop.

Officials are looking for more money from the NRCS and from the state. Sen. John Martin, D-Eagle Lake, is expected to offer a bill to address the problem.

"I can't say if we will lose growers, but I would be surprised if we did not lose growers," Flannery said Wednesday. "This is a very challenging year.

"We are trying to pick everybody's pockets to help out," he said. "Fresh potato shipments in Maine are down 26 percent - that is 1,300 loads."

On the whole, Flannery said, the industry is in better shape than it was 10 years ago because 60 percent of the crop now goes to processing, compared to 20 percent a decade ago.

Jim Pelletier, president of Edwin Pelletier Farms in Frenchville, said he expects some farms will fall by the wayside this spring.

"We've had no orders all winter, and those we had, we had to run after," Pelletier said Wednesday morning. "I finally found orders for 11 loads this week and shipped two loads out yesterday.

"The loads were refused this morning because of pressure bruises, and we are growers with good storage facilities," he said. "I've canceled the other loads and will spread them in the fields."

The NRCS program does not pay much, but the market is not much better at \$1.80 per hundredweight. Pelletier said by spreading them farmers save on buying bags and the labor needed to pack the potatoes for market.

"We have some farmers that are already in over their heads, and without money from their crop they can't pay their bills," Pelletier said. "Some owe a lot of money, and the price for their potatoes is simply not there."