



A potato digger shoots potatoes into its companion truck during seed potato harvest at Arnold Potato Farm in Felt.

TVN Photo/Ken Levy

Potato farm battles weather, uncertain markets

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With a batch of heavy storms delaying harvest of seed potatoes, and another batch forecast on its way, Dennie Arnold and his sons were hard pressed to get the tubers out of the ground before it was too late.

But they managed it, digging the last of the taters out of the Felt ground almost 10 days later than usual.

“The storms just kept coming,” said Dennie Arnold, who is in his 40th year running the farm that bears his name.

“We typically plan on being done between [Oct.] 10 and 15,” he said. They didn’t wrap up the harvest, which

usually takes 12-14 “good digging days,” until Oct. 22.

“Usually by now we’ve had some really hard frost, so we’ve been really lucky that way,” he said. “My dad used to say that the good Lord will stay with you and help you until the 10th of

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TVN Photos/Ken Levy

Adrian Villa unloads seed potatoes from the fields during harvest at the Dennie Arnold Farm in Felt Oct. 20.

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October, and after that, you're on your own."

Overall, the Arnolds harvested about 31.2 million pounds of spuds this season.

The farm has borne the family name since about 1914, when Dennie's grandfather Ab broke the sagebrush ground to begin the farm that eventually grew to 5,800 acres in Felt. Dennie's father, Keith "Bud" Arnold, bought out Ab, and Dennie returned to the farm in 1971 after a stint in the Air Force and running a Sunset Sports Center for a few years.

"My brother (Bruce) was here with my dad, who bought my grandfather out," Dennie said. "They had a chance to lease some more land, but dad didn't want to get into that much more work. Bruce talked me into coming back, and we rented the land. We all ended up working together and being one farm."

Dennie's sons, Jeremy and Eric, work with him on the farm, making them the fourth generation of

Arnolds working the land.

"It's a tough place to farm up here, you never know," Dennie said. "We've had some pretty lean times because of short seasons and frost. This is too high an elevation to be farming. I've been really broke a few times."

Arnold said the farm got "froze out" in 1983 and lost the entire potato crop, and "we had to rebuild from there."

In 1992, early frost and a poor market led to significant losses. As with most farms, profits, if and when they come, are largely dependent on variables that are out of his hands.

"It has a lot to with prices. You don't have any control. It's a supply and demand situation, and you can grow the most beautiful crop in the world and it might not be worth anything," he said.

Arnold was thrilled, however, when he learned of the senate's recent defeat of a proposal to limit potatoes in school lunches. It was a big victory for

Arnold and the potato industry in general.

"It's really huge," he said. "It would have had to hurt. There are a lot of school lunches in this country."

Arnold grows seed potatoes, wheat and malt barley. Depending on the season and rotations, about 1,300 acres are in potato production.

Arnold grows Idaho Crop Improvement-certified seed for commercial growers. He buys seed known as Generation 2 meristem plantlets, or mini-tubers, from the University of Idaho.

"We propagate it one year and sell it as Generation 3 to commercial growers," he said. His market runs "all the way to Moses Lake, Washington."

The Arnolds grow Russet Norkotahs, Russet Burbanks and Rangers. They also grow between 1,000 and 1,500 acres of hard white spring wheat, depending on the market. It's a milling wheat, which goes mostly to General Mills "because they have the corner on the milling market around here," he said.

Arnold's roughly 2,500 acres of malt barley goes largely to Anheuser-Busch InBev, in Osgood, Idaho, and to malt barley brokers in Ashton.

Arnold owns about 40 percent of the farmland, and leases the balance from "people that's quit farming," he said. "There used to be four families on this bench, and we're the only ones left."

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Sorter Miraela Perez cleans debris from seed potatoes at Dennie Arnold Farm in Felt.



Jesus Olivas, foreman at Dennie Arnold Farm, holds samples of seed potatoes that will be en route to sorting and cleaning. Olivas, who runs the cellar operation at the farm, has worked with the family since he was 13.