**Potatoes on the right track as performance food**

[Gregory Johnson](https://www.thepacker.com/guest-author/gregory-johnson)

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Mark Klompien, CEO of United Potato Growers of America, talks with Potatoes USA global marketing manager – school foodservice Rachael Lynch March 14 at the board’s annual meeting. ( Greg Johnson )

DENVER — A year ago, [Potatoes USA](https://www.producemarketguide.com/company/400824/potatoes-usa" \t "_blank) members started a new campaign to market [potatoes](https://www.producemarketguide.com/produce/potatoes" \t "_blank) as a performance food. A year later, they confirmed that’s the right track.

“We did research on what works and what doesn’t work,” said Blair Richardson, CEO of Potatoes USA, March 14 at the group’s annual meeting in Denver.

“Potatoes as a performance vegetable is something we can achieve. We’re asking people what they’re eating when they perform, and if they’re eating potatoes, that’s what we’re trying to create.”

The consumer marketing campaign encourages active people to be their best and beat their best, and potatoes are the fuel for that.

“We can all customize this program,” Richardson said. “If we all get behind it, we can change the perception of potatoes.”

Director of marketing programs Kim Breshears said the industry needs to move potatoes from “You can eat potatoes” to “You should eat potatoes.”

She pointed out that other foods – such as milk, nuts and avocadoes – have moved from negative nutritional perceptions to positive ones.

“Potatoes have complex carbohydrates,” Breshears said. “We all need them.”

John Toaspern, chief marketing officer, said the nearly 30 million target active consumers know how bananas and sweet potatoes improve their nutrition.

“They don’t know about potatoes, but they will,” he said.

Potatoes generally are in a good position as the nation’s top vegetable.

At the March 12-15 meeting, the board approved FY19 domestic marketing investments of $4.86 million for the July to June fiscal year. It is investing additional special projects of $200,000 each for reaching nutrition professionals, integration of performance into other programs and a website redesign for potatogoodness.com.

The board voted to keep its 3 cent per cwt. assessment, which is lower than it’s allowed under U.S. Department of Agriculture rules. The assessment returned $14.9 million for fiscal year 2017, up nearly a million dollars from 2016.

Mark Klompien, CEO of United Potato Growers of America told attendees that the 2017-18 season is returning $8.93 per cwt. to growers based on a 68.6 million cwt. russet crop, higher than the $6.44 per cwt. 5-year average on an average of a 73.9 million cwt. crop.

Meanwhile, white and red potato crops are having larger volume but not much grower return drop off from average prices.

“Yellow potatoes are seeing tremendous growth, averaging a 10% gain per year,” he said, noting that they’ve remained profitable for growers.

“Our models suggest there will be an acreage increase this year (on russets),” he said, but much of that is in processing potatoes, which already have buyers with increased foodservice business.

In other Potato USA news, the group plans to end its food truck program. Richardson said the program achieved nearly all its goals and metrics, but keeping the trucks staffed with quality workers has been too difficult due to the low unemployment rate in Denver, where it’s based.

The board will wind it down this fiscal year and run it as a zero-revenue program.