

## **Potato Wars: Interstate Rivalry Sometimes Friendly, Sometimes Not**

A 1976 Associated Press story documents the great potato war of words between Idaho and Washington. Washington assistant attorney general questioned Idaho Gov. Cecil Andrus in federal court about the Idaho Potato Commission advertising for which Andrus was the chief spokesman.

The conflict centered on advertising the Washington Commission began publishing in 1974, which attempted to explain, "Why Idaho potatoes grow better in Washington." That brought the Idaho commission to court.

According to the AP story, "The Washington Commission, in its advertising and officially, insists it isn't calling its potatoes Idaho potatoes. It says nearly all the commercially raised potatoes from Oregon, Washington and Idaho are from Russet Burbank or Idaho Russet Burbank seed, mostly from seed produced in Idaho."

At issue was whether Idaho was importing potatoes from other states and marketing them under the Idaho trademark.

Idaho potatoes were bringing \$10 to \$20 more a ton than identical potatoes from Washington. Between 1972 and 1976, Washington grew from fifth to second in the United States as a potato producer and did so on much less acreage than first place Idaho.

One ad that was readied for publication but cut by lawyers asked, "Which state is the highest per capita importer of potatoes in the country?" The implied answer was Idaho. An ad that did make it to print read, "Suing Washington doesn't change the facts! Russet Burbank Potatoes still grow better in Washington."

Idaho and Washington each claimed the seed grew better in their states, Washington because of the soil conditions and longer growing season and Idaho because of their altitude, warm summer days and cool nights.

The 1976 potato war scored an internal win for the 20-year-old Washington Commission, which had been facing queries from its growers on what they were getting for their 2 cent per hundredweight assessment. The national publicity the lawsuit garnered answered their question.

Fast forward to the turn of the century and the Idaho-Washington border was a safer place as the two commissions collaborated on federal grants, international trade and research programs. Advertising rhetoric was sounding suspiciously familiar, however.

A Washington Potato Commission ad in trade publications in 2002 said, "Go West" with a map of Idaho and dotted lines leading to Washington. Another ad had a photo of a potato with the caption "Unfamous Potato," spoofing Idaho's tag line. This time there was no lawsuit.