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# “FOR THE LOVE OF THE GAME”

## ALAN JONES LOVES THE POTATO PRODUCTION GAME

BY LANE LINDSTROM



**(ED—Since the time we wrote the original story, Florida was hit by another hurricane – Hurricane Milton – and inflicted much more damage than Hurricane Helene. We reached out to Jones for an update. He said, “It’s been a challenging few weeks to say the least. My personal residence has been flooded twice due to storm surge. Four pivots flipped, two barn roof structures ripped apart and we lost 200 acres of snap beans.”**

**However, he said, “On the bright side, we had not started planting potatoes. There was no loss of life or personal injury to my family or any employees. The weather has been really nice since the storm passed so we were able to get in the fields. It looks like planting will be postponed a week or so, so not too bad.”)**

Alan Jones (r) and Carson, one of Jones’ two sons who work with Alan on the farm, inspect one of their potato fields.

At some point or another – and usually multiple times – every grower has to deal with what Mother Nature throws at them. Weather, in some form or another, is always on a grower’s mind.

It could be a withering heat wave. Or a late frost. Or not enough rain. Or too much rain, especially at the wrong time in the growing season. Or maybe it’s a devastating hail storm. Or, it can be any number of other weather issues.

For growers in Florida that means hurricanes.

That includes potato grower Alan Jones, who raises 2,000 acres of chipping and table stock potatoes in the west central part of the state near Parrish, which is a bit southeast of Tampa



Bay. From one of his fields you can see Tampa Bay, showing how close his fields are to a major body of water.

Hurricane Helene was the most recent hurricane to barrel into the United States, leaving a swath of destruction across a good portion of the Southeast. Jones Potato Farm was spared, Jones said, but his personal home closer to the water wasn't. He told us he had 16 inches of water at his personal residence due to storm surge, leaving him and his wife Leslie to clean up the aftermath of the hurricane.

Jones said, "The farm came through very well with minimal damage to crops. Potato planting will start on schedule in mid October, as long as it quits raining."

Planting stretches into November with the harvest beginning in the winter and lasting into spring – February through May

About half of the potatoes grown on the Jones Potato Farm are Red La Soda spuds while the other half are Yellow Satinas. Being able to harvest their first crop of the season in February makes Jones Potato Farm the first in the country to be able to supply fresh potatoes to the market.

– letting Jones Potato Farm make the claim of being the first potato grower in the country to harvest and supply fresh table stock potatoes to consumers. The table stock potatoes are sold in the southeastern U.S., primarily east of the Mississippi River.

#### **Fresh Stock And Chipping Potatoes**

Of the 2,000 acres of potatoes, a big portion of Jones' 3,000 acres he farms, 800 acres are grown as chipping stock with



the balance going for table stock. The table stock potatoes are packed at Jones Potato Farm's 55,000 square-foot packing facility in Parrish and are offered in a variety of package sizes, including 3-, 5- and 10-lb. bags and 50-lb. cartons, bags and totes. They are then shipped to numerous different retailers. None are stored on the farm.

"We dig and load the potatoes to order with a minimum three-day lead time on our table stock potatoes," Jones explained.

Jones' primary varieties are Red La Soda and Yellow Satina with the farm raising about 50/50 of each. The yellows, Jones said, take about 100 days to mature and require a little more fertilizer and have a longer growing season than the reds, which take about 90 days to mature.

While hurricanes are definitely a concern, those are not the only challenges potato growers like Alan Jones face raising America's favorite vegetable in Florida. While northerners don't necessarily associate Florida with frost, Jones said a freeze is possible for about six weeks from December to February. Night-time temperatures during the growing season drop into the 50s while daytime temps are 60-70s. Short growing days are another challenge with just 9-10 hours of daylight during the growing season. That definitely accounts for yields in the mid-200 sack range. Of course, some yields will be higher later in the season. "The later window crops will yield higher," Jones said.

Jones doesn't say farming in sandy soils is too challenging, although he did quip while we were in one of this fields, "We call this Potato Beach" as he held up a handful of sand which flowed fairly freely out of his hand.

### Different Game Plan

Farming in soil as sandy as what you'll find on Jones' five farms (all within about 10 miles of each other) requires a little different game plan than what you'd expect in the northern growing areas of the country. When you look at his rows of potatoes you'll notice how tall the hills are in each row. They're tall, Jones explained, so that the water will drain away from the potatoes quicker. Potato seed, which Jones Potato Farm sources from Wisconsin and Maine and cut at his farm, are planted 3-4 inches deep and then hilled up. The potatoes grow fairly near the surface of the sandy soil.

"We've learned what it takes to grow potatoes in these conditions," he said.

While it would seem the area in this part of Florida gets plenty of water, Jones does, of course, have to irrigate during the growing season. Jones uses center pivots in some fields while in others he uses "seepage irrigation" where a field is flooded from



(top) This field of potatoes near Jones Potato Farm's packing shed are ready to be harvested. This shows how tall the hills are that owner Alan Jones grows his potatoes in in the sandy soil. This photo was taken in early February 2024 and the potatoes were scheduled to be dug a few days later.

(inset) Alan (l) and Carson Jones stand near one of the farm's center pivots. Alan Jones installed his first center pivot in 2014 and was able to shave his irrigation water use by nearly 60 percent.

underneath the plants rather than over the top. He installed his first center pivot in 2014, of which Jones said some people were very skeptical about but he soon proved its value by being able to cut back his water use by 57 percent. Those fields with center pivots have wells that are between 600-1,000 feet deep. The elevation of Jones' farms is about 35 feet above sea level.

### "City Moving Closer"

One of the more significant challenges Jones has faced in recent years is the rapid growth (read: lots of people moving in) of the area. "The city is moving closer to the farm everyday," he said. This comes into sharp focus when you look up Jones Potato Farm on Google maps and see the number of subdivisions



dotting the landscape, including big ones right across the U.S. 301 Highway near the farm's headquarters and packing shed. In fact, his fields are practically surrounded by subdivisions.

When visiting with Jones and driving from one farm to another, he talked about the rapid development and how his business has turned into a sort of real estate-based agriculture operation. Jones explained he had recently sold a piece of land to a developer but turned right around and bought another piece of land that he could farm. When asked about this selling/buying system and whether he is always on the outlook for farm ground already in production or fallow ground, Jones said, "I look at whatever is available."

Through all that, however, Jones says he maintains the core of his operation as a potato-based business.

Why does Jones continue to wrangle all these when he most likely could sell his valuable land and retire from farming. His answer was simple. "For the love of the game."

He added one of the things he most enjoys about being a grower/packer/shipper is "Putting a business plan together and then facilitating its success."

He has plenty of help in his operation who help with its success including his wife Leslie and sons Harrison (24 years old) and Carson (22). Additionally, he has 30 full-time employees year round but that swells to 120 during the harvest. He

Jones Potato Farm grows, packs and ships its potatoes from this 55,000 square-foot facility in Parrish.

commented, "We all play our roles but at the end of the day, we all will do whatever it takes to make a crop. A number of farm managers play integral roles in production."

That production includes – besides potatoes, of course – green beans, summer cover crops, watermelon and sod. He also has a small cow herd. The cover crops -- mostly sorghum although Jones said he's also interested in mustard – is a blend of various varieties of cover crops. Cover crops are grown during the summer to help give the sandy soil some tilth while also helping with carbon sequestration.

While Jones, as do many other growers, continues to juggle a lot of things while producing a potato crop, he still finds time to serve on a number boards and committees. His reason is fairly straightforward why he spends time advocating for farming. "In order to keep agriculture a viable business community, involvement and political leadership are paramount. Otherwise, people with no knowledge will be making the rules."

So yes, just like other potato producers across North America, Jones has his share of things to take care of to grow his crop. But there are probably locales less desirable than Florida.

And that accounts for something. **PG**

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