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*For more information contact:
Angela Smith at 207.772.2122
Don Flannery at 207.769.5061*

Maine Potato Grower to Chair United States Potato Board

Presque Isle, ME – Members of the United States Potato Board recently elected Maine chip stock grower Tom Qualey as Chairman of the Board, an honor last bestowed upon a Mainer more than two decades ago. It is an achievement not easily earned but rather the result of hard work, strong leadership, and, ultimately, a steadfast commitment to the potato industry.

“To have someone from Maine in a position to chair a national potato organization is tremendous,” said Don Flannery, executive director of the Maine Potato Board. “We’re number six or seven in potato production so to see Tom rise to the top, with the overwhelming support of top potato producing states, speaks volumes about both his character and his contributions to the industry.”

David Fraser, Vice President, Industry Communications & Policy Department, USPB, echoes this sentiment. “Qualey is extremely passionate about the potato industry and is willing to make personal sacrifices for the greater good,” he said. “He is an outstanding grower-leader and all around good person who will definitely move the USPB to the next level during his administration.”

As chair, Qualey will work closely with USPB President and CEO Tim O’Connor to advance the organization’s mission, which is to increase demand for potatoes and potato products through an integrated promotion program, thereby providing U.S. producers with expanding markets for their production.

Qualey is serving his sixth year on the USPB. During his tenure, he has served on the International Marketing Committee, the Industry Communications & Policy Committee, and the Finance Committee – working his way up from a full board member (100 members) to an administrative member (33 members) to the executive committee (nine members).

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Since 1977, Qualey and his older brother, John, have owned and operated Three Oak Farms, a 1,200-acre commercial farming operation, which produces potatoes, canola, mustard, corn, oats, and barley. For the past five years, Tom has been experimenting with growing and marketing gourmet potato varieties.

Tom is very active in the potato industry. He has participated at the board level with the Maine Potato Board, Maine Potato Growers, the Agricultural Bargaining Council, and the Integrated Pest Management Council.

There are about 380 potato growers in Maine, from Aroostook County to the western mountain region around Bethel and Fryeburg. The total impact of the potato industry on the state's economy is \$540 million in sales, 6100 jobs, over \$230 million in personal income, and over \$32 million in state and local taxes.

To find Maine potatoes, consumers should look for the Maine Quality Trademark – a blue, white, and red State of Maine trademark that is typically carried on all bags of Maine potatoes, even on private labels. Recipe ideas using Maine potatoes can be found at www.maine potatoes.com/recipes.html.

The Maine Potato Board

The Maine Potato Board was created in 1986 by an act of the Maine Legislature for the purpose of establishing a cohesive framework for effective leadership within the potato industry. Its mission is to provide a competitive environment for Maine's potato growers, processors, and dealers. The board also strives to create both stability and the infrastructure for future growth, while promoting the economic importance to the state and quality of the product.

Note to editors/reporters: Please see attached Q & A with Tom Qualey.

Q & A with Tom Qualey, New Chair of the U.S. Potato Board

Q. Can you tell us a little bit about when and how you became involved with the United States Potato Board?

A. I served on the Maine Potato Board for six years and very much enjoyed it. When my leadership role in Maine was coming to an end, I was approached about helping at the national level. I decided to go with it...I see some great opportunities.

Q. In regard to the USPB, what are you most proud of?

A. I'm most proud of what we've done as a group to congeal at the national level. We've worked diligently to pull growers together to make the potato industry stronger, and we've made a lot of progress.

Q. During your tenure, how has the potato industry changed and, specifically, what instrumental achievements have you witnessed?

A. We have fewer growers and acres, but greater yield. And, we face the challenge of keeping volume and usage up. One area we've grown incredibly is export. Here in the United States, we represent four percent of the world's population so there's a big market out there. If we can keep our dollar at an even state, export offers a wonderful opportunity. Just last year, we crossed the billion-dollar mark in exporting potatoes out of this country; that's a real accomplishment.

Q. In assuming this leadership role, what initial steps will you take?

A. We will continue to focus on getting the industry to work together – to cooperate rather than compete.

Q. What are your hopes for the potato industry at large?

A. My hope is to keep the industry fiscally fit. Our focus is sustainability – fiscal health and safe crops. I've always said, "Fiscally healthy growers will always do a better job."

Q. What does it mean to represent Maine at the national level?

A. I'll get to know a lot more about the business and the people involved in it. I've met a ton already and haven't found a bad one yet. I work with good people. I'll also gain a better understanding of the issues facing the potato industry.

Q. What did it mean to be elected by your peers?

A. It was absolutely great. As I stood up and the vote the unanimous...there's no other way to describe it then it was "some kind of great!" I worked hard to get here. It wasn't easy, but everyone was behind me. It was just great.

Q. What do you see as some of the key areas of focus for the potato industry in 2009?

A. We have to keep up demand – from processed to frozen to fresh potatoes. This is our biggest challenge domestically and internationally. We have such a busy society. It seems no one has time for the lonely potato anymore. We need to find a fit, a way for the potato to be part of our hurried society. We have a lot of people working on this at both the state and national level.

Q. Is there anything else you would like to add?

A. I am working with a great bunch of growers and staff, and we're all excited. This group is very professional, and I am looking forward to a busy, great year.