



Delayed harvesting in the NEPG. Uncertainties about final production!

November 24, 2023

Due to abundant rainfall, a lot of potatoes in the EU-4 have not yet been harvested. The lifting period was too short to get the potatoes stored in good conditions. Contracts for the upcoming season have to take higher rising risks and costs into account. Seed availability is an issue and concern for spring 2024.

After a moderate summer, potato yields were generally good. An average yield of 45,8 t/ha was achieved in the EU-4. This is an increase of 6,3 % compared with last year. Combined with increased hectareage, total production in the EU-4 is estimated at 23,6 million tonnes (22,9 Mt in 2021, a somewhat comparable year). For now, around 22,2 Mt appear to have been harvested. So there are about 1,4 Mt in the fields. NEPG does not speculate on how much will still be harvested, but part of the crop is lost for good.

Abundant rain

Poor weather conditions in October brought harvest activities to a halt after only 3 weeks. By mid-November, up to 250 mm of rain was recorded regionally, resulting in flooding. Northern France, the western part of Belgium and coastal regions in Holland suffered most. Most of the areas remaining to be harvested are in Holland (15 %) and Belgium (11 %). The costs incurred (harvest, washing, drying and storing) are high.

2023 reminds us that potato production is getting more difficult, risky, expensive and stressful. The weather in late spring and early summer (i.e. dry and hot) was typically one of "climate change". The abundant rains during late summer and autumn again showed typically what weather patterns are becoming. Contracts for the upcoming season have to take these risks into account.

Major concerns

Growers are worried about their unharvested acreage. Indeed, some potatoes cannot get out of the ground. Potatoes staying in anaerobic conditions can rot. Those that will be harvested, will possibly face quality problems and eventually will not be stored. Some contracts will not be fulfilled.

Rising prices

The difficult harvesting conditions are obviously affecting the free market. After a short period of oversupply, we are now in a situation of lower availability. In a matter of weeks, the potato free buy potato prices on the free market rose from 8 € to 20 € per 100 kg. Demand for healthy, dry potatoes is high both for industry and export. The coming weeks will show how many potatoes can still be lifted. There may be a temporary supply of wet lots. But there is no reason that prices could go down in the longer term. Early delivery of contracts could even lead to shortages in the long run (spring 2024).

Concerns about seed availability for 2024

Less hectareage (94.100 ha, -6,6 % vs 2022), less and bigger tubers than usual, and more downgraded seeds in the Benelux, France, Germany, Denmark and Scotland, will lead to a 20 % decrease of seed availability for 2024. Seed potato growers should be the first to benefit from the price increases announced for seed potatoes.