



Potato-Cast

Season 2: Episode 12

Title: Eye on Potatoes: Partnership with National Potato Council

Description: In this episode, Potatoes USA Conversation Architect, Natalia Cervantes, interviews Kam Quarles, Chief Executive Officer of National Potato Council about standing up for potatoes on capitol hill and why it's important to know about the issues that affect the potato industry.

Resources for this episode:

To be featured on Potato-Cast, email Natalia@PotatoesUSA.com

Learn more about Potatoes USA by visiting PotatoesUSA.com

To see all the great information available about potatoes, potato nutrition, or fun ways to cook with potatoes, visit PotatoGoodness.com

Intro:

Hello everyone! Welcome to Potato-cast. A podcast full of all your favorite potato industry content. I'm Natalia Cervantes, Potatoes USA Conversation Architect, and your host.

Due to the topic of today's conversation, I'd like to make the disclaimer that Potatoes USA is not involved in influencing governmental policy.

Nevertheless, there is an organization out there that is allowed to fight toward improving the policy landscape for potatoes. That organization is the National Potato Council. Their staff spend time advocating for the economic well-being of U.S. potato growers on federal legislative, regulatory, environmental, and trade issues.

Here with me today is the Chief Executive Officer of the National Potato Council (also referred to as NPC), Kam Quarles. Kam, welcome to Potato-Cast!

Quarles:

Hi Natalia. Thanks for inviting me. It was great having you in the leadership program earlier this year and it's fun to see you doing your regular job.

Cervantes:

Let's jump straight to business then, how long have you been standing up for potatoes on Capitol Hill?

Quarles:



I have worked for the National Potato Council for 13 years. First, they were one of my clients when I worked for a big law firm in D.C., and then I came on the staff full time in 2016. I took over as CEO in 2019.

Cervantes:

Have you always been working in this space? What makes you so passionate about policy and government?

Quarles:

I worked in the Senate and House right out of college. Then I started working on the advocacy side. Hard to believe but it has been almost thirty years at this point.

My dad was in charge of government affairs (among other things) for Sunkist Growers cooperative in California. I learned a lot from him and have always been working for agriculture and specifically the fruit and vegetable industry. That includes time at the National Council of Farmer Cooperatives, United Fresh Produce Association, and working for ag clients like the Florida Fruit and Vegetable Association, the California Avocado Commission, Chiquita and Sunkist.

Cervantes:

Research and promotion boards have been assisting the agriculture industry with marketing and other promotional activities for several decades.

But the National Potato Council is very different. Can you share how the organization was formed?

Quarles:

NPC began back in the 1940s. It exists to represent the interests of commercial potato growers throughout the U.S. on federal and international policy issues.

Cervantes:

Is NPC like other commodity boards, for example, Potatoes USA?

Quarles:

No, Potatoes USA is a research and promotion order that is overseen by USDA. Therefore, it has certain restrictions on its activities including that it cannot lobby on policy issues. NPC is a not-for-profit autonomous entity whose primary role is to advocate for the industry, among other activities. That's why we have "Standing Up for Potatoes on Capitol Hill" as our mission statement.

Cervantes:

I see. While Potatoes USA focuses on strengthening the demand for potatoes through marketing and research programs, NPC focuses on standing up for them.



Quarles:

Both organizations provide important roles for the industry. For example, you're probably familiar with the Alliance for Potato Research & Education, more commonly known as APRE. Potatoes USA promotes the latest APRE research to ensure the public has the latest information about potato nutrition. NPC uses that same research to help influence or modify federal programs.

Potatoes USA also distributes a variety of international market insights that NPC can use when discussing what countries should be priorities for USDA, the Office of the Trade Representative and Congress in expanding U.S. exports.

Cervantes:

Can you share some of the big wins that NPC has had for the industry in the last few years?

Quarles:

Absolutely. The first one clearly is Mexico. There were a lot of folks who never believed that we could get the Mexican market open for fresh potatoes. Through the coordinated efforts of NPC, Potatoes USA and the state organizations, supported by a great team in Mexico (funded in part by a USDA FAS grant) we fought the battle all the way to the Mexican Supreme Court and won a unanimous verdict last year. Through that court ruling and with the personal involvement of Secretary Vilsack, Ambassador Tai, and numerous USDA and USTR staff, the market was opened this Spring and remains open now. The successful opening of Mexico will mean a 10-15% increase in GLOBAL U.S. potato exports once fully built out.

Another huge victory was in dealing with the early stages of COVID. At that time, over 60% of the industry had its customers closed off due to the lockdowns, huge amounts of potatoes were going to waste and family farms across the U.S. were threatened. We worked very closely with USDA to develop a relief program that would matter for farmers in 2020. When all was settled out, over \$350 million in federal relief was delivered to U.S. potato growers. It was the most intense disaster relief effort I have ever been part of. The overall amount was both necessary and massive to address the economic impact.

Cervantes:

That's fantastic and a very impressive amount.

What are the issues on the table right now that farmers need to be aware of?

Quarles:

Inflation has been on everyone's mind over the past year. We had a session on it at the Potato Expo this year in Anaheim and it has only become larger since then. Also, we are entering into 2023 which is a Farm Bill year.

Cervantes:

Can you elaborate?



Quarles:

The Farm Bill touches on several areas that we care about such as trade, nutrition, research, conservation, etc. We want to make sure USDA has the resources and programs available that truly matter to the industry for the next five years.

Cervantes:

You must have a strong team that helps you advocate on the industry's behalf, and get these policies moved forward.

Quarles:

Teams make all the difference Natalia. In the policy space, when one person tells you "I alone can solve your issue" the only thing you can be certain of is that they're lying to you.

Our strategy for success on these issues is pretty much the same regardless of the details. We must identify important issues early, develop consensus on solutions that matter and can be implemented, and finally communicate those solutions consistently to all our interested partners through the effective voices of NPC, the state organizations, and all our grower members.

Using that simple process, we maximize the industry effectiveness of the most widely produced vegetable in the U.S.

Cervantes:

That's why we need to continue building strong industry advocates. If someone wants to get more involved in being a leader in the industry, what would you suggest?

Quarles:

The first thing that comes to mind is our leadership program. It is amazing how many people who rise up in the industry are alumni of the 20 Potato Industry Leadership Institute classes. This includes a huge number of Potatoes USA and NPC Board members. It is a great way to see all sides of this important industry and get a deep understanding of how the pieces fit together.

Cervantes:

I was a part of the 2022 PILI cohort and being together with other industry representatives from across the nation for eight days was an opportunity of a lifetime. It was powerful to visit other agricultural businesses, see how they operate and learn about their issues. PILI remains my favorite but can we talk a little about another great event that's coming up? The potato-expo. It's going to be here in Colorado at the Gaylord Hotel and I couldn't be more excited. What can attendees look forward to this year?

Quarles:

I actually just returned from the Gaylord Rockies where we were looking at the final planning for the Potato Expo 2023. The event is really taking shape and the support from attendees,



sponsors and exhibitors is tremendous. The location next to Denver International Airport is making it so easy for domestic and international participation.

Our Vice President of Industry Relations & Events, Hollee Alexander, and our whole team have been working to put together the highest quality Potato Expo ever. The show floor is going to be like nothing we have seen before, with nonstop activity on the main stage and valuable breakout sessions immediately adjacent to it. The enthusiasm for this event is overwhelming and we are so excited.

Cervantes:

What are some key topics that the sessions will address?

Quarles:

We will cover the full spectrum of issues facing our industry including trade, nutrition, sustainability, packaging, supply chain disruptions, new technologies, weather data and many others. It is amazing to see how many complex issues growers must manage to be successful today.

Cervantes:

Do these sessions align with the issues that the industry is currently facing?

Quarles:

That's an essential part of even being considered for participation in the Potato Expo. We have an advisory board that looks at all session topics and ensures they matter to attendees.

Cervantes:

I heard the expo might have a celebrity chef appearance, is that correct?

Quarles:

Not "a" celebrity chef Natalia, THREE celebrity chefs! We are so excited that Duff Goldman (of Kids Baking Championship), Ted Allen (host of Chopped) and Simon Majumdar (author and Food Network personality) will be with us in Colorado for a potato cooking competition including the great RJ Harvey from Potatoes USA who is a celebrity in potato circles.

Cervantes:

Three celebrity chefs under one roof cooking up spud love. Definitely something you don't want to miss. What else can we look forward to at the expo?

Quarles:

One of the high points of the Potato Expo is the auction for the Potato Leadership, Education, and Advancement Foundation (Potato LEAF). We will have a live auction on the main stage as well as a virtual silent auction. This important organization supports the industry's leadership program and is widely funded by growers and organizations across the industry including Potatoes USA.



Cervantes:

Standing up for potatoes is a big job. But even the CEO needs a day off. What do you do in your free time?

Quarles:

My wife and daughter and I live on Capitol Hill, so our weekends are usually consumed with soccer games, etc. I just got my private pilot's license, so that took a bit of work fitting that time in around all my travel in much larger airplanes. If I can find a good golf course, that's a nice outlet or a good place to scuba dive.

Cervantes:

Congratulations on the pilot's license. That's a big accomplishment! Sounds like you still manage to keep up with your hobbies, which is great! One last thing, I don't think I can let you go without sharing your favorite way to eat potatoes.

Quarles:

Natalia, you know I've survived in politics for 30 years by avoiding questions that get me into trouble. As long as they're potatoes from the U.S., there is no bad way to eat them.

Cervantes:

A politically correct answer, I expected nothing less from you. Thank you for taking the time to be here today, Kam. It's been a pleasure discussing all things potatoes with you. See you at the expo in January.

Quarles:

Thank you and Potatoes USA. Blair, Kim, RJ and the whole team there are great and very important partners in supporting this wonderful industry.

Outro:

This brings us to the end of our episode. National Potato Council has a podcast as well, called The Eye on Potatoes. Subscribe for the latest conversations about policy, advocacy, production, and of course, all things potatoes.

Potato-cast is growing. If you are an active member of the potato industry, we'd love to interview you about your operation. To submit yourself or your friend, please email natalia@potatoesusa.com. It would be a pleasure to hear from our dedicated listeners.



Thank you for listening to this episode of Potato-cast! You can subscribe on Spotify, Apple, or Google Podcast by searching for Potato-cast. Feel free to share potato-cast with your friends and family in the industry.

All supporting documents for data provided in this episode can be found on potatoesusa.com. To see all the great information available about potatoes or new and fun ways to cook with potatoes, visit potatogoodness.com.

I am your host, Natalia Cervantes.

Until next time, have a lovely, potato-fueled day, everyone.