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## OPINION

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# **STUDY ASIDE, THE POTATO IS GETTING A BAD RAP**

*By Governor C.L. "Butch" Otter*

"It's not my fault – it's the food!"

Sound familiar? Well, get used to hearing more of it now that the *New England Journal of Medicine* has published the results of a new Harvard study that indicates regularly eating potatoes contributes to weight gain.

News flash: Regularly eating ANYTHING in an irresponsible way contributes to weight gain and other health concerns!

The results of the study were dutifully covered in the *Los Angeles Times* and other news media. But despite the headlines and all the heads nodding as if to say, "I knew it all along," the truth is that the potato's real nutritional value wasn't adequately examined in those reports.

As Governor of America's largest potato-producing state – a distinction of which we're justifiably proud – I'm disappointed that this study singled out potatoes, one of the most nutrient-dense and affordable vegetables available to people around the globe. In fact, the United Nations declared 2008 as the International Year of the Potato, recognizing how the potato can produce more nutritious food, more quickly, on less land, using less water, in harsher climates than any other major crop.

The declaration rightly encouraged nations to grow and consume more potatoes.

Historically, the potato has proven itself to be a lifesaver of cultures from the Andes to Europe and even Asia. We too easily forget that the great Irish migration to North America in the mid 1800s resulted from the *lack* of potatoes, which resulted in famine. Sailors used the potato to eliminate scurvy due to its high vitamin C content. Many Europeans survived food shortages following World War II by eating potato culls found in fields.

Yes, you could almost live by eating potatoes alone. But nobody I know – including members of the Idaho Potato Commission – would recommend anything of the kind.

Nutritionally, few other vegetables are as healthy as a potato. One medium-size (5.3 ounce) skin-on potato contains just 110 calories per serving, has more potassium (620g) than a banana, provides almost half the daily value of vitamin C (45 percent), and is abundant in other important vitamins and minerals.

Additionally, Idaho potatoes have been certified by the American Heart Association as a heart-healthy food because they are naturally fat-free, cholesterol-free and sodium-free.

Significant research has been done over the years on many aspects of the potato, ranging from its nutritional profile to its role in weight loss. There was even a study from 2001 to 2008 that concluded adults and children consume more servings of vegetables when their meals include non-fried white potatoes. Another study released last October by the University of California-Davis and the National Center for Food Safety and Technology, Illinois Institute of Technology indicates that people can include potatoes in their diet and lose weight.

The premise of the new, headline-making study conflicts with the long-validated understanding that weight gain is fundamentally tied to calories consumed versus calories burned. Of course the most ridiculous claim in the new findings put potatoes and soft drinks in the same food category, labeling them basically nutritionally equivalent. How can a credible researcher claim the empty calories of a soft drink are equivalent to a vegetable that contains vitamin C, potassium, protein, fiber, folate and other healthy nutrients?

As we continue to fight the obesity epidemic, our nation's leaders – whether they are in politics, public health or research – have a responsibility to provide accurate information to help consumers make smart choices about the foods they eat. Americans don't need another fad diet to waste millions of dollars on while continuing to gain weight, and raising inflammatory allegations about a food as pure and natural as a potato is counterproductive.

By the way, you might be interested to know that at age 69, besides being Governor I still actively work my ranch and compete in rodeo events – and I get my energy from regularly eating Idaho's famous potatoes – Harvard, the *New England Journal of Medicine* and the *Los Angeles Times* notwithstanding.

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