

## **POTATO DEMONSTRATION PROJECT FIELD DAY TO BRING STATE GROWERS AND WHOLESALE BUYERS TOGETHER**

**Charleston, W.Va.** – Commercial buyers from some of the country’s leading wholesalers will visit West Virginia Wednesday, July 15 to meet with growers and inspect some of the fields that are a part of the state’s Potato Demonstration Project, a joint venture of the West Virginia Department of Agriculture (WVDA), the West Virginia Conservation Agency (WVCA), and its affiliated Guyan and Western Conservation Districts.

The field day will include visits to farms in Mason and Lincoln County. Participants will meet at 10 a.m. in the parking lot near the Home Depot, 1050 Thundering Herd Drive, in Barboursville, just off of I-64 (exit 18). Transportation to the farms will be available. Media members who wish to travel in their own vehicles are encouraged to drive SUVs or other high-wheel-clearance vehicles.

The aim of the three-year project is to get West Virginia farmers involved in the commercial potato industry, while encouraging environmentally friendly practices through technical assistance and financial incentives.

“We’re not just growing potatoes, we’re growing farmers,” said West Virginia Commissioner of Agriculture Walt Helmick. “There’s a \$6 billion gap between what we eat in West Virginia and what we produce. We have to convince farmers that they can scale up their operations to a level that will give them far more marketing options while maintaining their family farm appeal.”

WVDA has provided \$250,000 for planting and harvesting equipment the conservation districts can loan to program participants, as well as seed potatoes, fertilizer and other chemicals.

“This is economical economic development. For a relatively small state investment, we can reignite the self-reliance that West Virginians pride themselves on. We can inspire what has been an afterthought industry in this state to grow our economy from within, keep our food dollars here, and, in fact, import food dollars from elsewhere,” said Commissioner Helmick.

WVCA Executive Director Brian Farkas noted that participating farmers have signed cooperator agreements with the Guyan and Western Conservation Districts’ Agriculture Enhancement Program that require conservation planning for planting and harvesting activities, as well as use of winter cover crops to reduce erosion.

“This is not a free ride for the farmers,” said Farkas. “They, of course, are providing a substantial amount of labor and personal equipment, they are giving up some level of control over how they operate, and they must pay 50 percent of the cost of the cover crops.”

Participating farmers have also agreed to attend food safety training provided by WVDA. The farmers attended a mandatory Good Handling Practices/Good Agricultural Practices (GHP/GAP) class on June 30. A farm food safety plan writing workshop will be held later this summer. Commissioner Helmick said the program focuses on potatoes because West Virginians consume more potatoes than any other vegetable. Also, an increasing number of West Virginians are interested in buying locally grown produce, and the cost to ship potatoes to West Virginia can cost more than the potatoes themselves.

“Besides providing a financial impetus, the WVDA has agreed to help market this year’s crop. That’s why we’ve arranged to bring in commercial buyers to see what we’re doing here,” said Commissioner Helmick. “We know they want to keep their shipping costs low and we think they’re going to be impressed by what they see here.”

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**Potato Demonstration Project Facts-at-a-Glance**

Volume:

29 family farms participating

83 acres enrolled

Varieties:

Kennebec

Red Maria

Chieftain

Salem

Keuka Gold

Strawberry Paw (NY 136)