

WET WEATHER DOESN'T HAMPER TURNOUT AT POTATO PROJECT FIELD DAY

Charleston, W.Va. – State officials, local farmers and commercial buyers spent a misty morning in Mason County at the G & G Nursery farm July 15, talking about the growing consumer demand for local agricultural products and how West Virginia farmers can take better advantage of the opportunity.

The state's Potato Demonstration Project is 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 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."

Counties involved in the project include Boone, Cabell, Lincoln, Logan, Mingo and Wayne in the Guyan Conservation District along with Jackson, Mason and Putnam in the Western Conservation District.

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The West Virginia Department of Agriculture protects plant, animal and human health through a variety of scientific, regulatory and consumer protection programs, as mandated by state law. The Commissioner of Agriculture is one of six statewide elected officials in West Virginia. For more information, visit www.wvagriculture.org.