

More West Virginia Farmers Planting POTATOES

What's your favorite vegetable? If you're a typical American, the answer is the potato (source: USDA). The West Virginia Department of Agriculture (WVDA) wants state farmers to get on board with reestablishing the potato industry here at home.

In 1927, the USDA reported West Virginia produced more than six million bushels of potatoes on 53,000 acres of land. That's a lot of spuds. "We can't expect to get back to those 1927 numbers in just a few years," stressed Commissioner of Agriculture Walt Helmick. "But our Potato Demonstration Project is a start. If we can give our farmers support and market opportunities, the state can build back the industry."

The WVDA and the West Virginia Conservation Agency (WVCA) teamed up with more than two dozen farmers in 2015 to plant the seeds of success. A rainy spring put a bit of a damper on the potato crop. "It was rough going for some of the farmers. West Virginia had one of the wettest June's on record last year," said Helmick. "Those things happen when you're farming. You can't control the weather."

The first harvest of more than 400,000 lbs. was sold to grocery stores, farmers' markets, Farm to School programs, and wholesalers. Putnam County purchased 12,850 lbs. of potatoes, Cabell County 11,350 lbs. and Mason County 10,000 lbs. Other school systems who purchased the West Virginia potatoes included: Wood, Fayette, Hardy, Jackson, Ritchie, Pocahontas, Lincoln, Boone and Wayne.

In year two of the pilot program, the WVDA has added a third district and increased the number of farmers. In the Guyan District (Boone, Cabell, Lincoln, Logan, Mingo and Wayne), 12 farmers planted 30 acres of potatoes. In the Western District (Jackson, Mason and Putnam), 18 farmers are working 34 acres. And in the new Elk District (Braxton, Clay, Nicholas and Webster), seven farmers are raising 11.5 acres. That adds up to 75.5 acres and 37 participating farmers.

"The first goal of the pilot project is to increase the yield from year one in the Guyan and Western districts and compare and contrast the two seasons. The second goal is to increase the number of potatoes that go to market," according to WVCA Executive Director Brian Farkas who is heading up the project.

This year, farmers planted Kennebec, Red Norland, Keuka Gold and Salem potato varieties in April. As part of the pilot program, the WVDA has invested more than \$100,000 to help cover the cost of seed, equipment, fertilizer, and other items needed to grow potatoes. When the spuds are harvested later this year, the farmers will have the opportunity to use the WVDA's new Aggregation Center in Huntington. From there, the potatoes will be marketed and sold. Some will go out of state but many will stay in West Virginia.

"Our forefathers had it right. They grew all of their food in their backyards. They fed themselves. We've gotten away from that. West Virginians currently purchase more than \$7 billion worth of food each year yet we only grow less than \$1 billion. That's \$6 billion dollars we could spend right here at home. That's thousands of jobs we can create. And most importantly, people would be eating fresh, local food, not products trucked in from all over the world," stressed Helmick.

The pilot project will continue in 2017. If you have questions, contact Farkas at bfarkas@wvca.us or 304-558-2204.

