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STATE'S CRANBERRY GROWERS HAVE MADE BIG GAINS IN SUSTAINABILITY, UW SURVEY FINDS

Wisconsin's cranberry growers have made significant gains in the adoption of sustainable management practices over the past two decades, a new University of Wisconsin-Madison survey indicates.

That survey queried 114 producers who manage about 70 percent of the state's cranberry acreage about their use of practices that bolster sustainability from an economic, environmental and social standpoint.

Among the most significant improvements were in nutrient management, says Jed Colquhoun, associate professor of horticulture, who surveyed producers in late 2009. Seventy-three percent of growers say they now follow a nutrient management plan, while 13 percent say they were doing that in 1989. Eighty-eight percent are basing fertilizer inputs on soil tests; fewer than 60 percent were doing so 20 years ago.

"This is impressive," says Colquhoun. "Following a nutrient management plan greatly reduces the risk of excessive application of nutrients. It means that growers are applying only the nutrients the plant needs, based on soil sampling and plant tissue tests.

"They're not doing this because they have to," he adds. "They're sincere about reducing environmental risk and also economic risk. Measurement allows for management. They now have real-time information on how to make their production decisions."

Wisconsin's 250 cranberry growers have more than 17,000 acres in production. Cranberries are the state's leading fruit crop, valued at about \$250 million in 2008.

Colquhoun says the survey offers both an inventory of current practices and a reference point for gauging further improvements in use of sustainable practices.

"Sustainability is a continuum and not an end point, and this survey suggests that cranberry growers have made great strides along this continuum in the past 20 years," Colquhoun says. "This survey sets a benchmark for assessing future improvements in environmental, social and economic metrics, as well as to identify areas of opportunity for the development of more grower-driven best management practices."

Mike Moss, president of the Wisconsin State Cranberry Growers Association, sees the study as a step toward identifying new and enhanced best management practices.

"Cranberry growers in Wisconsin have been working for years to implement farming techniques that maximize business while at the same time conserve land, water, resources and wildlife found on the marsh, and we hope to do even more," Moss says. "The UW-Madison report provides an excellent baseline to measure growers' environmentally friendly methods of farming and the industry's economic sustainability for the long run."

Among other survey findings:

- Eighty-eight percent of growers use non-chemical practices, such as flooding and weather monitoring to predict insect life cycles, to control pests.
- Ninety-seven percent say they make spraying decisions based on pest thresholds rather than spraying by calendar. That's up from 68 percent in 1989.

- Seventy-seven percent hire integrated pest management consultants to focus on biological and ecological approaches to pest management, up from 55 percent in 1989. Cranberry acreage is scouted for pests an average of 14 times per season.
- Growers maintain more than 6.3 acres of support lands, including natural wetlands and conserved wildlife habitats, for each acre of cranberry marsh.
- Ninety-eight percent of the state's cranberry operations are family owned. The average operation has been producing for 39 years and involves two generations of family members.
- The state's growers average two year-round employees and three seasonal employees. About 70 percent of year-round employees receive health and retirement benefits.
- Wisconsin's cranberries travel an average of 35 miles from field to receiving facility.
- About 40 percent of growers either host or conduct research on their farms.

The research was funded by the Wisconsin Cranberry Board, Inc., which administers the state's cranberry marketing order. Under that order, growers are assessed 10 cents per barrel of fruit sold, which is used to fund research, education and marketing programs.

The full report is available at www.cals.wisc.edu/downloads/SustainableCranberry.pdf

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