



## Ready to Direct Wisconsin Seed Potato Certification Program

Dr. Renee Rioux considers program a shining example of the Wisconsin Idea in action

By Joe Kertzman, managing editor, *Badger Common'Tater*

On July 22, Dr. Renee Rioux officially assumed the role of assistant professor, University of Wisconsin (UW)-Madison Plant Pathology Department. Her first day on the job, though, was during the Hancock Agricultural Research Station Field Day, July 18.

She also transitioned into her new position as the administrative director for the Wisconsin Seed

Potato Certification Program (WSPCP) in early August. It's been a great transition so far.

"One aspect of the program that stood out during my interview, and is even more evident now that I am here, is the high caliber of people associated with the Wisconsin Seed Potato Certification Program," Dr. Rioux says.

**Above:** Dr. Renee Rioux was introduced as the new administrative director of the Wisconsin Seed Potato Certification Program during the 2019 Hancock Agricultural Research Station (HARS) Field Day. As it turns out, the HARS Field Day was also her first day on the job as an assistant professor in the University of Wisconsin-Madison Plant Pathology Department.

"From Alex Crockford and the inspectors in Antigo to Keith Heinzen and the State Farm team in Rhinelander, Andy Witherell and Brooke Babler on campus with the tissue culture program, and Drs. Amanda Gevens and Russ Groves as interim directors and current advisors to the program, plus the grower community, everyone has worked hard to keep the program running smoothly over the past few years and it shows," she stresses.


A Maine native, Rioux received her Ph.D. in plant pathology at UW-Madison, in 2014, and has spent the past five years in private sector research and development, most recently with Bayer Crop Science as a product development manager for nematicides and bio-fungicides.

"People have been very welcoming and eager to help, for which I can't thank them enough," Rioux says.

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**Have you been working in the fields at all, and if so, where and in what capacity?** I enjoy field work and am looking forward to having significant field research components in the future.

I did collect a few field samples from the State Farm for a small project in the lab. It was a very rainy day and Joshua Kunzman, who was helping me, will probably never forgive me for getting him so soaked!

My trips off campus have been to meet with various members of the WSPCP—Alex, Josie Spurgeon and the inspectors in Antigo, Keith, Joshua and the State Farm team in Rhinelander, and a number of growers who have been kind enough to welcome me to their farms during the busy harvest season.

As a newcomer to the program, I think it is essential to get to know and understand the roles and needs of all the WSPCP's stakeholders, so that has been my focus so far.

And I appreciate the time that people have spent with me sharing their research interests and feedback on the program.

**What do you feel are your main duties as the Seed Potato Certification Program director?**

**Your main goals?** I could probably write a whole article on these two questions alone, but I'll highlight just a few of the main points.

For duties, providing the leadership necessary to maintain and improve upon the high caliber of our program is critical, from tissue culture to early generation seed tuber production at the Lelah Starks Farm, and inspection and certification.

Important duties of my position as administrative director also include providing a link between the WSPCP program and campus resources, and serving as an unbiased, data-driven final decision maker when sticky situations come up.

One of my biggest goals as

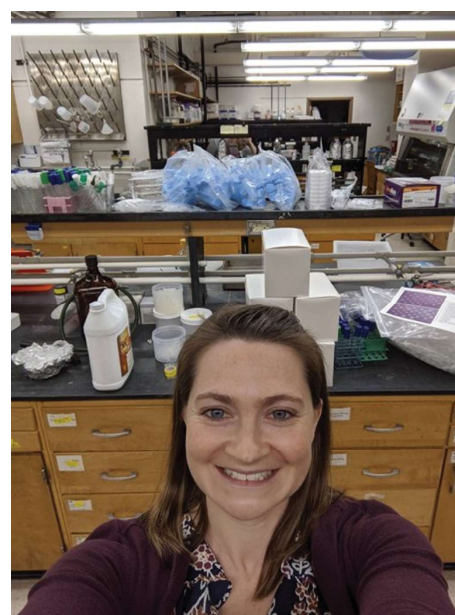
administrative director is to work with the program to help adopt new technologies that make our operations more efficient and secure the funding to make implementing these changes possible.

This could take the form of new farm equipment to help us grow and harvest potatoes more safely and efficiently, software to enable better data collection and management, unmanned aerial systems for virus detection to help our inspectors make the most of their field visits and more.

Another goal I have is to make the program more visible throughout CALS (UW College of Agricultural & Life Sciences) and the university community in Madison.

We have such an incredible history and are a shining example of the Wisconsin Idea in action.

This should be shared with chairs, deans and other campus



In her role as assistant professor in the UW-Madison Plant Pathology Department, Dr. Renee Rioux will be leading a class and research lab. She says she's excited to work on setting up the lab, even if it is a bit chaotic now.

administrators, and it is my goal to make sure we have that level of visibility and can share the farm with a larger campus audience.

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Undergraduate Jenna Rach (left) is the first employee of the Rioux lab and is helping get the lab space in order. Undergraduate Jack Gordon Knoke (right) is conducting an independent study project with water samples from the State Farm hydroponic system.



**How was the 2019 crop?** From what I've seen and heard, the crop was looking good and mostly recovered from the tough spring conditions.

It's impressive how well the growers know their fields and can adjust variables throughout the growing season to produce a high-quality crop, even when conditions are not ideal.

The biggest concern, especially

after last year, was the weather for harvest.

**Is being an assistant professor in research and teaching roles a familiar role for you, and how is the year going?** I've always been involved in research and teaching, but this will be in a different context for me since I'll be leading both the class and the research lab, which means lots of lecture preparation and grant writing.

As a master's student, I taught as an adjunct at the local community college and then I was a teaching assistant for a couple plant pathology classes while pursuing my Ph.D. in Madison.

While in the private sector, I had the opportunity to start a research program with a startup company and maintained teaching roles by putting on professional development workshops with the American

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Phytopathological Society.

I really missed formal classroom teaching and having the opportunity to mentor students in research, which was one of the biggest reasons I decided to make the jump back to academia.

I'm happy with how the year is going so far—I have a lot to do but I feel like I am making steady progress.

I've been busy trying to connect with members of the seed certification program and growers off campus while also ordering a lot of the essentials to get a research lab going.

I'm very lucky because Dr. Gevens made sure lab items that were already with the seed potato program stayed put the past few years, so I have a decent amount of equipment and lab tools to help me get going.

I currently have a couple Ph.D. students rotating through the lab, an undergraduate completing an independent study project with me, and another undergraduate student helping get the lab set-up who will also eventually be conducting research.

It is very exciting to see the lab team start to take shape! Luckily, I do not have to teach this year and have some time to get the lab's research program up and running before taking on a teaching assignment as well.

**You mentioned you became enthralled with plant pathology while pursuing your master's degree on rhizoctonia diseases of potato at the University of Maine. Why do you think you took a liking to plant pathology?** The first thing that made me like plant pathology was the field work. I looked forward to every opportunity to visit the field because it felt so much easier to connect my research to the results when I was out there among the plants, seeing diseases firsthand.

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It only took a couple trips to the potato growing regions in northern Maine for me to know that I wanted to make this work part of my lifelong career.

I also love being outside and active, so doing things like spreading compost, taking soil samples and harvesting by hand are totally up my alley.

On a more practical level, I had always wanted to find a profession that would involve helping people.

My parents both worked in hospitals and I had leaned toward health science as an undergraduate, but it never felt like quite the right fit.

When I wound up in a plant pathology laboratory by something I can only describe as “serendipity,” I realized that agriculture is critical to ensuring a stable food supply, which is just as necessary for human well-

being as doctors and medicine.

I was hooked after that and it turned out that plant pathology was the perfect way to integrate my newfound love of agriculture with my previous interest in the health sciences.

**How will your background help you as the director of the Seed Certification Program?** One of the greatest ways my research background will help me as director of the WSPCP is in having the agility to quickly address new research needs as they become apparent.

As a master’s student, my research was very molecular, and I worked on a gene expression project. My Ph.D. project was much more applied and in a totally different discipline within plant pathology—turfgrass disease.

Since then, I’ve worked with many different disease systems and gained comfort across pathogen types.

I am confident that, whatever issue comes up, I’ll be able to address it and, if I don’t have the know-how myself, I’ve learned how to connect with other experts who can help me learn what is needed to pursue research in a new area.

**You spent five years in the private sector. How will that experience aid you in your new roles?** My time in the private sector involved three years at a startup company and around two and a half years at Bayer Crop Science.

These were two very different experiences, but both taught me a lot about leadership and communication. These skills will be crucial for success in my new roles, especially in my position with the WSPCP.

Through these roles, I’ve learned that one of the most important characteristics of a good leader is humility, being able to admit when there is something I don’t know and learn from those with more expertise.

Coming into this role as a novice to the seed potato industry, asking the right questions, listening and learning from the many experts around me will be crucial to getting started on the right foot.

Another important lesson I learned from my experiences in the private sector is that you must look at the whole picture.

When I was developing crop protection products, I had to think about whether a product would fit into the existing system and, if it would not, whether or not its value was so great that growers would be willing to adopt a new practice to be able to use it. I had to think about monetary costs too.

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With my research program, I think it's important to keep these lessons in mind.

I want to conduct research that considers the seed potato production system and doesn't focus in at such a minute level that the end results are not practical.

**You and your husband both have Ph.D.'s from UW-Madison. What is his focus, and is he also working at the university?** My husband is also in the agriculture space and he describes his focus area as agricultural resilience.

After years of working at grower organizations, including the National

Corn Growers Association and U.S. Farmers & Ranchers Alliance, he returned to private consulting when we moved back to Madison.

He works closely with a few university groups but is not associated with the university; we like to keep a healthy level of professional distance!

In funny coincidences, his former Ph.D. advisor is currently a member of the Wisconsin potato industry, and many of his dissertation committee members are still faculty members involved in potato research.

**Where did you move from, and are you enjoying Wisconsin so far? Hopefully your one-year-old son, Craig, is adjusting to his new home.**

Yes, we are thrilled to be back in Wisconsin! We were in St. Louis, Missouri, and the Raleigh, North Carolina, area for the intervening years and neither felt like home.

We love the four real seasons in Wisconsin and are looking forward to winter so we can ski and snowshoe.

Craig (we've nicknamed him C.J.) is a trooper and adjusting well, minus the whole being 15 months old and screaming about everything phase.

We just moved from a temporary apartment into our (hopefully forever) home and are all excited to finally be settling down. C.J. loves the extra space to run around, and our dog, Scotch, appreciates having a yard again.

My husband is excited to brew beer now that we have a basement (our home in North Carolina didn't), and I can't wait to decorate the place now that we're in a home where we plan to stay for a while.

**What do you think you can bring to the table to assist Wisconsin seed potato growers?** I bring an open mind and an ability to listen. While I have my own research interests,



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I took this role because I want to help Wisconsin's seed potato growers.

I am looking forward to collaborating with stakeholders in the WSPCP and grower community to identify and pursue the most pressing research needs for the program and the industry.

I also have broad experience across sectors, which will help me to consider issues from various angles and be strategic. Finally, I am not afraid to speak up when something is important. I think that will be an important part of advocating for the WSPCP and the industry.

An important skill I learned in the private sector, but did not mention previously, is how to give and receive feedback.

I view feedback as information that can be used to learn and improve, not as an insult or threat. I will always seek to gain additional insights on how the program and I can best

support the Wisconsin seed potato industry and will welcome input from all sources.

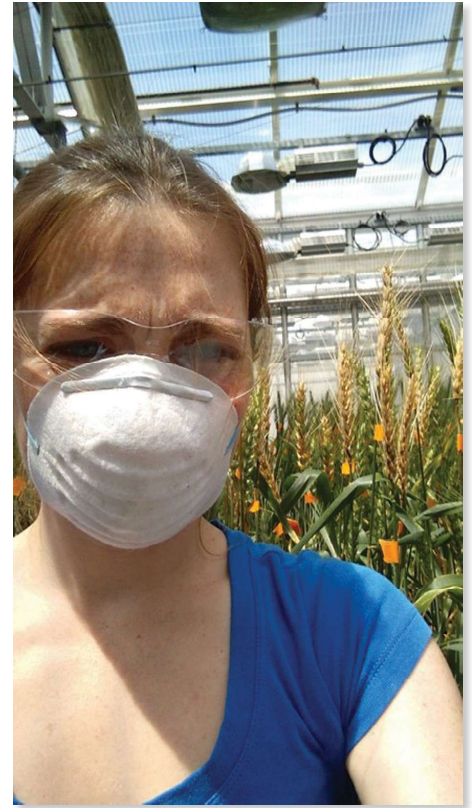
I understand that I won't be able to meet everyone's needs and will need to make difficult decisions, but I also know that being as open and transparent as possible will go a long way in building and maintaining positive relationships.

**What would you most like to accomplish in your new roles?** As a researcher, I endeavor to conduct innovative research that advances scientific understanding but is also directly related to the needs of the seed potato industry and provides useful information.

As a teacher, I plan to equip students with the knowledge and skills necessary to be informed citizens and appreciate the value of agriculture in their day-to-day lives.

And, as administrative director for

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One of many research projects, Dr. Renee Rioux worked with inoculated wheat during her time employed with a startup company.

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the WSPCP, I aim to maintain the excellent reputation of the program by taking a proactive approach in addressing issues facing the Wisconsin seed potato industry, working closely with members of the campus, program and grower community to get there.

**Do you work at the State Farm in Rhinelander often?** I've made it to the State Farm a couple times and am looking forward to becoming more involved in the future.

It will be a balancing act between campus demands and making time to get to the farm and other sites around Antigo and Rhinelander, but the farm provides an incredibly valuable service, and making time for it needs to be a priority.

Right now, I am working with Joshua on some research questions related to the greenhouse and hydroponic system.

I'm also planning to spend some time at the farm during harvest to better understand how operations work. In the future, I hope to have graduate students spend time there as well because I think it provides a great training opportunity.

**Wisconsin's Seed Certification Program has a solid reputation and is well respected. To what do you attribute that?** A huge part of the success of the WSPCP is that it is a collaboration between the university, the seed potato growers and the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection.

This brings together an incredible amount of expertise and connects research directly to the certification program. As a result, we have always been at the forefront when new issues confront certification.

Over 100 years of success in seed potato certification is an amazing track record and it is a privilege to be part of such a great program.

While the leadership of the program has been excellent over the decades, I also think the hard work and dedication of all the people involved in the program have been instrumental in maintaining the program's success.

**Long-term, what is your vision for the future of the Seed Certification Program?** My long-term vision for the WSPCP is to maintain its stellar reputation and continue to cultivate

interactions between the university, growers and beyond.

I would love to see the program grow and take on even more of a leadership role in the U.S. seed potato industry.

I think we can do this by continuing to employ great people, maintaining close integration between research and certification, and pursuing new technologies that help the program accomplish its mission.

**Is there anything I've missed, Renee, that you'd like to add?** I would just like to reiterate how happy I am to be on-board with the program and how much I am looking forward to working with the WSPCP and the seed potato industry in Wisconsin.

I am working my way through the list of growers to try and visit with everyone by the end of my first year but encourage people to reach out and share your ideas or input on the program with me.

Finally, I just want to thank everyone who has made me feel so welcome already! **BCT**



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