



WPVGA NAVIGATES UNCHARTED WATERS

An update on a few highlights for the potato and vegetable industry

By Tamas Houlihan, Executive Director, WPVGA

When the Wisconsin Department of Health Services issued the Safer at Home Order, on March 25, the Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association (WPVGA), along with millions of others, was forced to navigate uncharted waters for the next three months.

As I write to you today, we are still discovering this changing new world. Amidst this vast sea of change, a lot has happened, and I would like to provide an update on a few of the highlights for the potato and vegetable industry.

Potato Planting Season Successful
While working remotely became

the norm for millions of Americans, farmers and the agricultural industry continued to conduct business as usual, going about their essential duties of feeding the world.

Seed potatoes were still being shipped in March and Wisconsin growers hit the fields in April and continued to plant through the month of May. Most of the crop went into the ground in favorable conditions.

This was a change from the previous two years that were extremely cold and wet in April and May. And while this year's May temperatures were cooler than normal, at least the crop

was not two weeks behind schedule as has been the recent norm.

Time will tell how the growing season progresses, but all indications are we're off to a great start.

High Capacity Well Permitting Process Changes Again

In early June, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) revived its Lake Beulah high capacity well permit review procedures. In a nutshell, we believe the Wisconsin Supreme Court in effect ratified the Schimel Attorney General opinion in *Wisconsin Legislature v. Palm*.

That is, the DNR has no authority to impose permit review criteria that are not explicitly set forth in the high capacity well statute.

The action by DNR was anticipated as a response to Wisconsin Attorney General Josh Kaul's May 1 withdrawal of the Schimel opinion.

The WPVGA, represented by the Great Lakes Legal Foundation (GLLF), went on record opposing Kaul's withdrawal. This precise issue is currently before the Wisconsin Supreme Court in *Clean Wisconsin*

Left: Cut seed potatoes are ready to plant on Mortenson Bros. Farms, Inc., in the spring of 2020. Seed potatoes were still being shipped in March and Wisconsin growers hit the fields in April and continued to plant through the month of May. Most of the crop went into the ground in favorable conditions.



v. DNR. GLLF represents the following eight Wisconsin business associations as intervenors in that action:

1. Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce
2. Dairy Business Association
3. Midwest Food Products Association
4. Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association
5. Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association
6. Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation
7. Wisconsin Paper Council
8. Wisconsin Corn Growers Association

Our top priority is having DNR continue to operate its high capacity well permit program consistent with the Schimel opinion and the Department's practice prior to *Lake Beulah*.

Those practices are authorized and limited by its enabling legislation—Wis. Stat. § 281.34—and existing rules. Withdrawing the Schimel opinion does not change those legal foundations for the program.

The Supreme Court is expected to rule on the Clean Wisconsin/DNR lawsuit this fall. In the meantime, the WPVGA will work with growers and the Department to ensure that our members understand the process and requirements for high cap well permitting.

Governmental Affairs, Research and Water Task Force Focus on Water Quality

As part of an effort to address groundwater issues and protect drinking water and public health across Wisconsin, the DNR is working with key public and agriculture industry stakeholders to update Chapter NR 151 of the Wisconsin Administrative Code.

The NR 151 rule modification is to develop a targeted performance standard to abate nitrate pollution

in areas of the state with highly permeable soils that are susceptible to groundwater contamination (sensitive areas) for the purpose of achieving compliance with the nitrate groundwater standards.

The rule revisions will define sensitive areas in the state and the performance standards needed to protect groundwater quality in these areas.

The potato and vegetable industry is well represented on the NR 151 Technical Advisory Committee by grower Larry Alsum along with University of Wisconsin (UW)-Madison Horticulture Professor Dr. Jed Colquhoun.

The WPVGA Governmental Affairs Committee, led by co-chairs Mike Carter and Steve Diercks, continues to closely monitor this issue.

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Research related to reducing nitrogen (N) use on potatoes has been the focal point of the WPVGA in recent years.

UW scientists Yi Wang and Matt Ruark continue to work on low N trials for various potato varieties, while Paul Mitchell and Deana Knuteson are beginning to work on an economic impact statement related to potential N reductions.

The WPVGA Water Task Force continues to cooperate with Ankur Desai of the UW Atmospheric and Oceanic Sciences Department to gain even more accurate measurements of evapotranspiration (ET), which is directly related to crop water use and can be utilized to help reduce nitrate leaching.

The WPVGA continues to cooperate with Discovery Farms on a phosphorus reduction project in Antigo, and plans are underway to work with Discovery Farms on a nitrate reduction project in Central Wisconsin.

Potato Research Projects Continue Despite No Field Days

With over \$375,000 in funding, the entire 2020 Wisconsin potato research program continued as planned. The University of Wisconsin, however, cancelled the potato field days that had been scheduled this summer at Hancock, Rhinelander and Antigo.



WPVGA Member Development Program participants evaluate potato chips in the lab at the Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Storage Research Facility (SRF), Hancock, in 2019. Pictured are (left to right) Devin Zarda (back to camera), Troy Fishler (SRF Manager), Rich Wilcox, Ted Melby, Brian Lee and Matt Smith.

The UW research team had to follow some new protocols that limited the on-farm trials that had been planned, but adjustments were made and the projects are proceeding.

There is still a possibility that a virtual research reporting meeting will be held, but at a minimum, research results will be shared at the WPVGA Grower Education Conference & Industry Show, in February.

National Summer Meetings Go Virtual

In June, the National Potato Council (NPC) held its first ever virtual summer meeting. Despite the impacts of COVID-19, the NPC continues to advocate on behalf of potato growers nationwide.

With the extreme downturn in the foodservice market, growers and processors lost millions of dollars in business.

The NPC worked closely with state potato managers to obtain the largest federal assistance in the history of the potato industry (in May, the U.S. Department of Agriculture announced a \$50 million surplus potato purchase).

And while this was not sufficient to offset the huge losses, it provided much-needed help and was a step in the right direction.

Potatoes USA also announced it will hold its summer meeting in a virtual format. The meetings will take place over several days in late July.

WPVGA Offers Member Development/Leadership Training Program

One valuable industry initiative that we hope to conduct with face-to-face meetings is the upcoming WPVGA Member Development Program.

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From November of 2020 through March of 2021, the WPVGA will conduct this leadership training program (one-day sessions, once a month for five months).

The program is designed to prepare members of the WPVGA to be future leaders. It will provide them with the opportunity to learn about and participate in all the various facets of the industry by exposing members to

information, resources, activities and people for networking opportunities.

This program will be highly beneficial, not only to the graduates, but to the industry as a whole. We are helping to educate, train and develop the future leaders of Wisconsin's potato and vegetable industry.

Many important and complex decisions lie ahead for the industry.

By creating this leadership base today, the industry is investing wisely in its future.

I'm very pleased to report that all 25 participants in the 2018-'19 program completed the leadership training and graduated.

Of these, one is currently on the WPVGA Board of Directors (Alex Okray); one is on the WPVGA Associate Division Board (Rich Wilcox); three are on the Wisconsin Potato Growers Auxiliary Board (Brittany Bula, Datonn Hanke and Devin Zarda); one is on the United Potato Growers of Wisconsin Board (Doug Posthuma); one is on the Wisconsin Seed Potato Improvement Association Board (Matt Mattek); and one is a newly elected board member on Potatoes USA (Kevin Schleicher).

Yet another (Michael Wolter) participated in the national Potato Industry Leadership Institute in February (along with Posthuma). Several other participants are also currently serving on various WPVGA committees.

Watch your weekly Tater Talk e-newsletters and future issues of the *Badger Common Tater* for more information and registration materials for the 2020-'21 program.

Keep on Farming

I hope all our members are doing well and finding your way in this strange new world. We may have to chart a new course or two, but we'll get through this.

If there is one thing I've learned, it's that farmers, food producers and their suppliers form the backbone of our country. Those involved in agriculture continue to serve on the front lines in the fight against COVID-19.

I'm proud and honored to work on your behalf. **BCT**

Tamas Houlihan
Executive Director, WPVGA

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