



# 2021 YEAR IN REVIEW: MULTIPLE CHALLENGES MET!

## The WPVGA overcame obstacles to have a successful year as an organization

By Tamas Houlihan, WPVGA Executive Director

2021 can be described as a year that brought forth one challenge after another. To the great credit of our membership, these challenges were met, one by one, with great success.

In the end, the Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association (WPVGA) and its members had a very successful year. The following are some of the highlights for the industry in 2021.

### Above-Average Growing Conditions; Excellent Harvest Season

In 2021, Wisconsin potato growers faced a series of weather challenges from frost to extreme heat and from drought to heavy rains, but in the end a nearly ideal harvest season reaped a resilient crop in most of the state's primary growing regions.

Wisconsin's harvested potato acreage is approximately 65,000 acres. The average yield on acres harvested in Wisconsin is estimated to be 420 cwt. (hundredweight)/acre, a decrease of 5 cwt./acre compared to 2020.

That puts Wisconsin's potato



WPVGA Executive Director Tamas Houlihan and Attorney/Lobbyist Jordan Lamb testify in favor of Senate Bills 677 and 678 at a Senate Hearing in Madison.

production at 27,300,000 cwt., an increase of 950,000 cwt., or 4 percent compared to 2020.

### Focus Continues on Water Quality and Quantity

In the spring of 2021, the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) issued its findings from the Central Sands Lakes Study, which it was required to do following the passage of a 2017 bill related to the repair, replacement,

reconstruction and transfer of ownership of high-capacity wells.

A key point in the DNR's study "found that precipitation is the primary factor affecting lake level fluctuations."

In an average year, the Central Sands gets over 32 inches of precipitation, and even the highest-use vegetable crop only uses about 22 inches of water. Accordingly, the vast majority of the time, agricultural irrigation will not have an adverse effect on lake levels.

All of the lakes in the study are currently at historically high-water levels.

Long Lake, which shows the most susceptibility to the effects of irrigation, is over four feet above the historical average, and it would take several years of continually dry conditions before the lake level would

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fall back to even average levels.

The WPVGA supports the concept of empowering farmers and community stakeholders to develop a cooperative plan to manage groundwater in the Central Sands region.

WPVGA appreciates that the DNR has committed to identifying impacted resources and “envision[s] a flexible, economically reasonable and science-based approach” to Central Sands groundwater management.

The WPVGA and its member growers have shown that, with combined efforts and a variety of voluntary conservation practices, they can effectively manage outstanding water resources, such as the Little Plover River.

The Little Plover River Watershed Enhancement Project has been a resounding success and a shining example of how collaboration can

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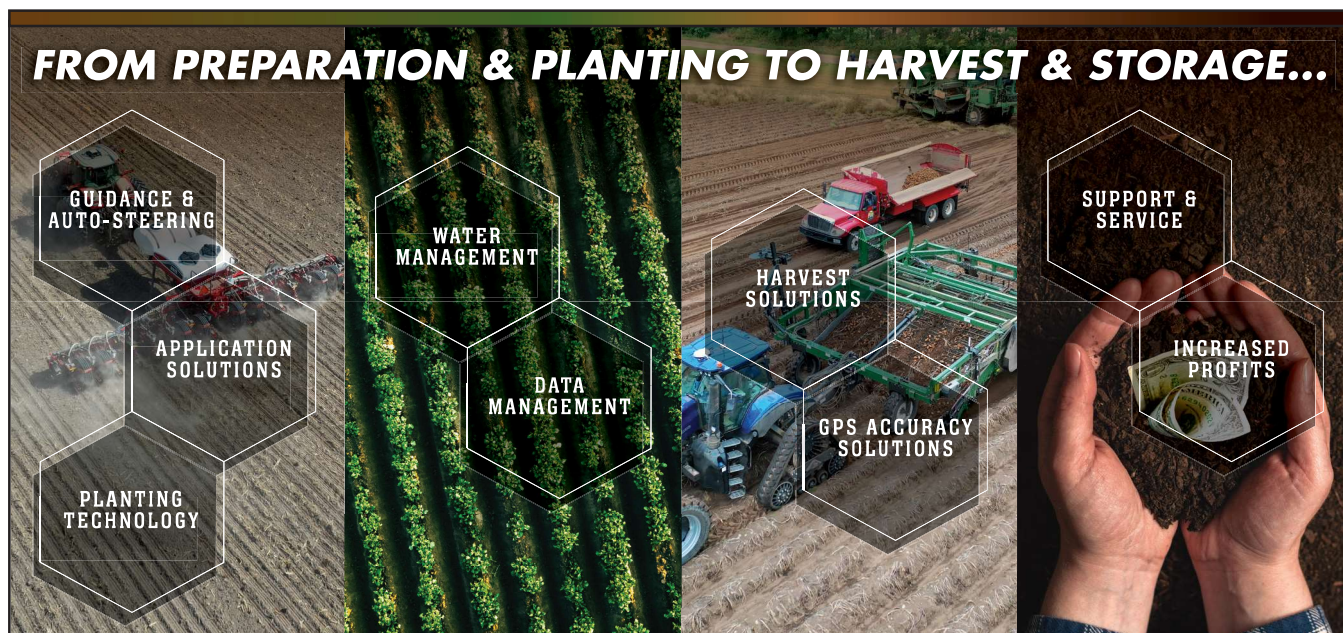
Participants in WPVGA's Member Development Program take part in a potato chip and French fry taste test in the lab at the Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Storage Research facility, in Hancock. Shown here are, from left to right, Don Maum of Alsum Farms, Jared Suchon of Bushman's Riverside Ranch, Mike Johnson of McCain Foods, Nicola Carey of Wysocki Family of Companies and Curtis Meister of Reabe Spraying Service.



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### NR 151 Rule Revision Terminated; Water Quality Bills Move Forward

As part of the effort to address groundwater issues and protect drinking water and public health across Wisconsin, the DNR worked for the past two years with key public and agriculture industry stakeholders to update Chapter NR 151 of the Wisconsin Administrative Code.

The NR 151 rule revisions were intended to define sensitive areas in the state and the performance standards needed to protect groundwater quality in these areas.

Following the public comment period, during which enormous economic impacts were identified by the WPVGA and other agricultural organizations, the proposed rule revisions were not brought before the DNR Board.

In November, the DNR announced that, “The statutory process and associated firm timelines established by the Legislature for rule-making do not allow adequate time for the department to complete this proposed rule.”

The WPVGA Governmental Affairs Committee, led by co-chairs Mike Carter and Steve Diercks, continues to closely monitor this issue, along with the association’s lead attorney, Jordan Lamb.

In continuing our work to promote clean water, in the fall of 2021, the WPVGA testified in favor of two bills aimed at improving water quality.

Senate Bill 677 creates and funds a nitrogen optimization grant program designed to incentivize farmer-led water quality improvements.

The WPVGA and our growers have

been committed to water quality research and developing improved practices through our research projects for decades.

SB 677 also provides farmers with rebates for cover crop insurance and establishes a hydrogeology position at the University of Wisconsin (UW).

We also support the programmatic changes to the DNR’s well-testing grant program and the producer-led watershed program contained in Senate Bill 678.

### WPVGA Group Receives Second Producer-Led Watershed Protection Grant

Six WPVGA-member farms in Central Wisconsin joined together, in 2021, to protect the watershed that includes the Little Plover River and a portion of the Wisconsin River.

With leadership from Plover River Farms, the group includes Feltz Family Farms, Firkus Farms, Myron Soik & Sons, Okray Family Farms and Worzella & Sons.

With matching funds from the WPVGA and working closely with UW Extension and the Wisconsin Wetlands Association, the group was successful in securing a second grant from the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection for more conservation work in 2022.

One new farm was also recruited to join the effort: Hamerski Farms of Plover.

This partnership envisions a healthy and productive working landscape in Wisconsin’s Central Sands region.

Through on-farm conservation and collaborative partnerships, the group seeks to promote innovative stewardship practices that benefit the watershed, landscape and land managers themselves.

Conservation practices employed by the group include the extensive use of cover crops, prairie and pollinator

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plantings, and no-till/minimum till practices.

#### **FarmersForCleanWater.Com**

In a further effort to highlight the great work being done by growers and researchers, the WPVGA launched a new website in 2021: <https://farmersforcleanwater.com>.

With the focus on “Feeding America’s Families” and “Protecting our Water,” the website contains great documentation of all the efforts of the WPVGA, its members and allied researchers that demonstrate our industry’s commitment to clean water.

The new site generated multiple media interviews and created a great deal of positive publicity for our efforts.

#### **Promotions Committee Expands Awareness of Wisconsin Potatoes**

The WPVGA Promotions Committee worked with comedian Charlie Berens on a series of hilarious videos that




Wisconsin-based comedian and social media icon Charlie Berens offers a potato to Andy Diercks of Coloma Farms while shooting a video that instantly generated thousands of views and greatly increased consumer awareness of Wisconsin potatoes.

were produced and aired on multiple social media channels in 2021.

The “First Time Potato Grower” video had over 400,000 views on YouTube the first day it aired! With

all the other social media outlets utilized, the video was seen by over 1 million viewers, greatly increasing the awareness and exposure of Wisconsin potatoes.

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### Also, a big Thank You!

We want to thank many businesses and individuals who in 2021 contributed time and resources for the success of our research and outreach activities. We are thankful for your generosity as you help us sustain our research farm and Storage Facility activities. Among these are:

- ADAMA
- AMVAC Chemical Corp.
- BASF
- Bayer
- Case IH Program
- Coloma Farms
- Corteva
- Farmers Implement LLC
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- Potatoes USA
- Roberts Irrigation
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- Willis Family
- WPVGA
- WPVGA Associate Division





Continuing in that vein, a very amusing and entertaining television episode of Mad Dog and Merrill's "Midwest Grill'n" was produced and aired, in the fall of 2021, and featured members Brian Lee of Okray Family Farms, Kevin Schleicher of the Wysocki Family of Companies, Trina Sankey of Worzella & Sons, Tamra Bula-Garz of Gary Bula Farms and Sue Thomas of Alsum Farms & Produce.

To top things off, the entire episode was taped in a potato field that was being harvested during the shoot!

A newly created consumer newsletter called "Wisconsin Potato Bytes" made its debut in April of 2021.

Featuring potato tips, nutrition and recipes, its purpose is to engage

and communicate with consumers while also gathering a database from which to monitor their trends and behaviors.

With the ability to share each issue on social media and with friends, the goal is to keep Wisconsin potatoes top of mind for consumers.

The Promotions Committee also continued its usual programming, including driving the Spudmobile to targeted large events; sponsoring Powered by Potatoes athletic events; utilizing billboards along interstate highways; sponsoring Gabe Sommers auto racing; promoting Wisconsin potatoes at Menards stores and sponsoring the National Hot Rod Association (NHRA) with Menards; and renewing a huge Wisconsin

**Above:** The WPVGA launched a new website in 2021: <https://farmersforcleanwater.com>. The site highlights the industry's comprehensive efforts to safeguard Wisconsin's water resources.

potato promotion in October at the Jewel-Osco grocery store chain, in Chicago.

### **Member Development Program Returns**

After being postponed in 2020, the WPVGA Member Development Program is back in 2021.

This has proven to be one of the most valuable leadership training and networking programs offered by the association, with 25 members graduating from the 2018-'19 class, many of whom are now serving on various industry boards and committees.

The program has 14 participants in the current program, taking part in five full-day sessions over the fall and winter of 2021-22.

### **Field Days and Grower Ed Conference Return to In-Person Format**

After enduring a year without an in-person grower conference, trade show or research-related field days, it was refreshing to return to well-attended, in-person field day events in Antigo, Hancock and Rhinelander, in 2021.

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## **Here is the Public Service Announcement that was announced live at NHRA events this summer:**

*Being your best requires the right fuel. Healthy Grown Wisconsin potatoes provide the vitamins and minerals your body craves. So, Power Your Performance with Wisconsin Potatoes. They're nourished by fertile Wisconsin soil, sprinkled with fresh Wisconsin spring water and grown with rich Wisconsin farming heritage. Serve up your Wisconsin potato pride. It's the greater tater. Now available at Menards.*

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continued on pg. 24



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Plans have been made to hold an in-person Grower Education Conference & Industry Show this month.

The WPVGA also continues to support a robust applied research program, with base funding for UW researchers in the areas of insect, weed and disease management, as well as soil science/fertility, potato breeding, seed certification and

general potato production.

Base funding is also provided to the Langlade Agricultural Research Station.

In 2021, the WPVGA Research Committee also approved grants for 16 competitive projects, with total research funding of over \$350,000.

#### **Biotron Move**

A big issue facing the industry in 2021 was the need to upgrade and move the Tissue Culture and Diagnostics Laboratory (TCDL) for the Wisconsin Seed Potato Certification Program from the Biotron at UW-Madison.

The cost to move the TCDL from the Biotron is estimated at \$1.4 million, and the Wisconsin potato industry was asked to contribute, since this facility is vital to the entire industry.

Working together with the Wisconsin Seed Potato Improvement Association, the WPVGA was able to make a pledge of \$250,000 over the next five years toward the project. This will enable the UW to move forward with the upgrade of this critical facility.

With the Biotron closing its doors in the spring of 2022, the TCDL will occupy new space in the Wisconsin Crop Innovation Center.

#### **Industry Supports New Mid-State Technical College Facility**

Finding a well-trained, skilled and reliable workforce is key to the success of our industry. To this end, the WPVGA and the WPVGA Associate Division boards committed \$50,000 toward an exciting new training facility to be built in Central Wisconsin.

Launching "Project Workforce," the boards presented the donation as a challenge to our individual members to match the \$50,000 donation.

The Advanced Manufacturing, Engineering Technology and Apprenticeship Center represents Mid-State Technical College's

commitment to agriculture through the creation of a Central Wisconsin training destination to cultivate the next generation workforce.

The center will provide training to address fundamental changes in the manufacturing industry and will keep agriculture and manufacturing strong in Central Wisconsin.

Graduates will assist in supplying our industry with the skilled workforce that is so greatly needed.

#### **The Future is Now for Farming for the Future Foundation**

An exciting new venture founded by the Pavelski family, Farming for the Future Foundation (FFTFF) will break ground in 2022.

The FFTFF is dedicated to helping families understand and appreciate their food and the people who grow it. The Food and Farm Exploration Center will be a place for education, unforgettable family experiences and great, wholesome food.

A tremendous resource for teachers and schools, it will be an excellent destination for families and agritourists as well as school groups.

It will offer a unique way to learn about careers in agriculture and help generate the future workforce for the entire industry. In keeping with its mission, the foundation will also continue the creation of plans to increase agricultural literacy in Wisconsin classrooms.

The Exploration Center will serve as a hands-on educational learning facility with interactive exhibits focused on various areas of crop production and cutting-edge technology used in agriculture.

Fundraising efforts are in full swing, and plans are to break ground on land donated by the Worzella family, in Plover, during the spring of 2022.

#### **Associate Division and Auxiliary Continue Great Work**

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number of significant contributions to the industry in 2021, including very generous donations to Mid-State Technical College's new facility as well as the Farming for the Future Foundation.

These two projects are changing and improving the workforce landscape of Wisconsin, along with the lives of many future employees and the economic sustainability of the area.

The Associate Division also continues to award grants to potato-related organizations and has held very successful golf outing and trap shoot events.

The division also joined forces with the Auxiliary to award multiple scholarships to students whose families are members of the WPVGA.

The Auxiliary continues to promote Wisconsin potatoes and raise funds for its other programs by selling and serving delicious baked potatoes at the Wisconsin State Fair.

It kicked off a new program, in 2021, called "Potatoes in the Classroom." This is a grant program that offers financial support to high school family and consumer science classes and ag teachers who use Wisconsin potatoes in their classroom.

The Auxiliary also continues to offer the Kids Dig Wisconsin Potatoes program, which instructs teachers on how to grow potatoes in their classrooms with students.

The Auxiliary provides seed potatoes to teachers, along with many tools and resources on the Kids Dig website. It also provides gift cards to the first 25 teachers who sign up in order to help them purchase the resources to get started.

#### Outstanding Staff

I want to thank the outstanding staff of the WPVGA, Julie Braun, Doug Foemmel, Jane Guillen, Joe Kertzman, Dana Rady and Karen Rasmussen, for excellent work and commitment to the Association.

Of special note is Director of

Promotions and Consumer Education Dana Rady, who celebrated her 10th anniversary at the WPVGA in 2021. Congratulations, Dana!

In closing, I would like to thank all the members of the WPVGA, along with our outstanding Board of Directors led by President Bill Guenther.

Special thanks go out to the Wisconsin Potato Industry Board as well.

I am proud of how we all worked together to meet the challenges of 2021. Always remember that with challenges come opportunities. Here's looking forward to more opportunities in 2022. BC'T

Sincerely,

*Tamas Houlihan*  
Executive Director, WPVGA



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