McCain Holds Innovation Hub Field Day

Wysocki Produce Farm showcases its Nitrogen Optimization Grant project fields

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

The McCain Foods Innovation Hub Field Day, August 14, 2024, at Wysocki Produce Farm, in Bancroft, focused on soil fumigation alternatives and grant opportunity projects through the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (WDATCP).

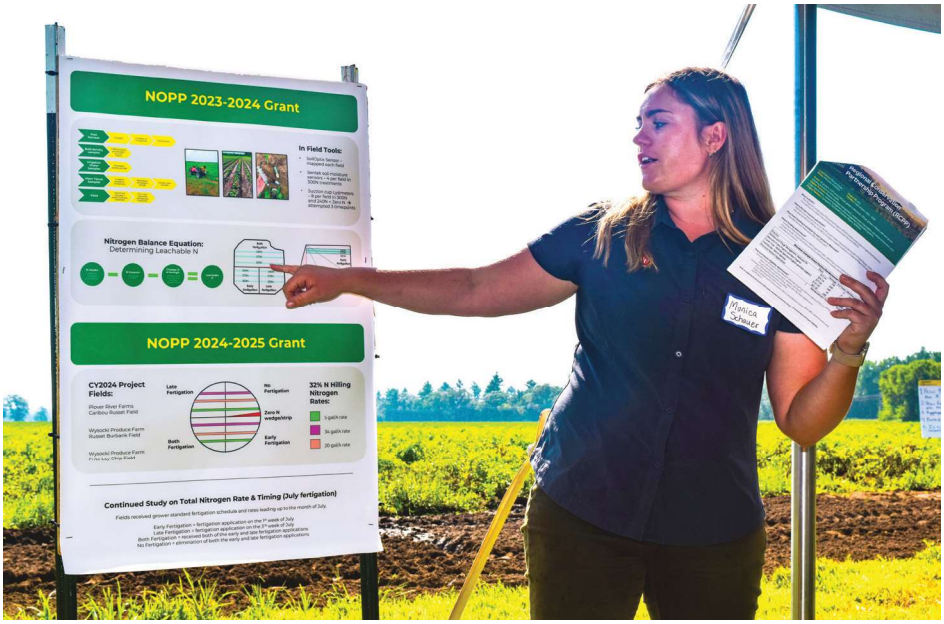
The purpose of McCain Innovation Hub Field Days is to showcase field trials and research that address environmental challenges unique to each local region on a commercial scale.

The growers, in this case, Wysocki Produce Farm, share their knowledge and field trial findings with other local partners during the field days.

Field day attendees enjoyed breakfast snacks and refreshments at the field before rotating through several stations where they received an overview of McCain's Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP).

Created under the 2014 Farm Bill, the RCPP is a five-year initiative aimed at improving soil health through potato supply chains. McCain hopes to enroll 35 growers from Wisconsin and Maine who will work with the company's Soil Health Institute to adopt a soil mapping and sampling, and cover cropping and rotation plan.

Awarded $7 million by the Department of Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), McCain growers are afforded the opportunity to apply for RCPP grants. Grant recipients will each enroll 240 acres



Above: **During the Innovation Hub Field Day, Kelly Verhaalen (left) of McCain Foods shares goals of the Nitrogen Optimization Pilot Program (NOPP), which are to improve commercial nitrogen efficiency across Wisconsin, reduce nitrate concentration in surface water and groundwater, and improve producer profitability.**

Left: **Monica Schauer, a UW-Madison researcher, says NOPP research trials include four nitrogen (N) rates (0, 240, 270, and 300 lbs. N/acre), four replications, and timed fertigation events (early and late season, and both).**

into a three-year project focusing on:

- Pest management
- Cover cropping
- Nutrient management
- Reduced tillage

At the field day, growers were provided clear guidance on the application process, eligibility criteria, and the financial incentives available to participants.

For example, set goals of the Nitrogen Optimization Pilot Program (NOPP) are to improve commercial nitrogen efficiency across Wisconsin, reduce nitrate in surface water and groundwater, and improve producer profitability.

DATCP offers a maximum grant award of $40,000 to agricultural producers to conduct two-year on-farm NOPP research projects. Trials include four nitrogen (N) rates (0, or control, 240, 270, and 300 lbs. N/acre), four replications, and timed fertigation events (early and late season, and both).

"The overarching goal is to guide our program correctly so we can reduce applied nitrogen by 10% in commercial potato fields. We need to start taking these steps today and publicizing the results."

– Monica Schauer,
University of Wisconsin-Madison researcher and NOPP director

"We hope to understand how a specific processing russet variety's yield and quality responds to nitrogen rates and fertigation timings, while also measuring the nitrogen balance within the season," says Kelly Verhaalen of McCain Foods.

Another project example is the Expanding Soil Health Through Carbon Markets RCPP, which pays farmers for implementing conservation practices to benefit soil health, improve productivity and sequester carbon and other greenhouse gases.

Increased soil organic matter is one of the seven key regenerative agriculture indicators representing McCain's Regen Ag Framework.

To capture a change in soil organic matter, McCain is offering a voluntary and free sampling program to russet potato growers for crop year 2025.

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The soil samples will serve as baseline values of fields and the reference soils will aid in the development of region-specific targets.

Featured speakers at the Innovation Hub Field Day included Drs. A.J. Bussan and Mike Copas of Wysocki Produce Farm, Monica Schauer and Lindsey Rushford from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and Hanna McKinney of McCain Foods.

PRODUCT PORTFOLIOS

Ryan Meredith of TKI-NovaSource, Izaak Rathke from Meristem Crop Performance, Dean Weldert of Pharmgrade Inc., Korey Sutton from Corteva Agriscience, and Adam VandenPlas, Bayer Crop Science, gave brief overviews of products in their corporate portfolios that can help growers reach their goals.

"The overarching goal is to guide our program correctly so we can reduce applied nitrogen by 10% in commercial potato fields," Schauer, a UW-Madison researcher and NOPP director, said. "We need to start taking these steps today and publicizing the results."

Dr. Bussan explained that Wysocki Family of Companies is looking at alternatives to fumigation. "Because mitigating the need for fumigation is so potato variety affected," he remarked, "we can now collaborate with growers to find new varieties that work."

"I agree with the enthusiasm McCain brings because we have a lot of innovative growers, and this is a fun program to be part of," Bussan continued.

"Another thing that's exciting," he added, "is that we're all invested

Dr. Mike Copas of Wysocki Produce Farm (left) shares field trial findings with Ethan Olson (right), who is vice president of the WPVGA Associate Division Board of Directors, during the Innovation Hub Field Day.

Above Left: Hanna McKinney of McCain Foods discusses "Improving Soil Health in the Potato Supply Chain" with Innovation Hub Field Day attendees. The goal of a five-year $7 million project funded by the Department of Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is to engage 35 growers in Wisconsin and Maine to enroll 240 acres each into a three-year project focusing on pest management, cover cropping, nutrient management and reduced tillage.

Above Right: Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association Executive Director Tamas Houlihan (left) discusses the Nitrogen Optimization Pilot Program (NOPP) with Steve Diercks (right) of Coloma Farms. Coloma Farms just completed its first year of a two-year on-farm NOPP research project.

in regenerative agriculture, such as establishing cover crops and employing three-to-four-year rotations, for example. We're also trying to mitigate nitrate leaching, which was hard to manage this year with all the rain."

Late in the program, lunch was served at Ponderosa Pines, in Bancroft, where McCain representatives discussed variety development, agronomy and harvest strategies.

Daniel Metheringham, McCain Foods vice president of agriculture, North America, stressed, "We've got to get new varieties in Wisconsin, an assured supply, and prime the pump to drive efficiency and achieve good yields out of every field, every year."

Nicole Nichol, McCain Foods director of agriculture, seed and variety, agreed, saying, "New varieties like Plover Russet that we can put in our variety trial program are our future. We'll see how it processes in each region, and then take it to our commercial and storage trials."

With that, other McCain representatives introduced themselves and their roles within the Regional Conservation Partnership Program and thanked those in attendance at the Innovation Hub Field Day. BC'T

Above Left: Representatives from companies offering crop protection products gave brief overviews of how traditional programs can be combined with microbial solutions to improve commercial nitrogen efficiency across Wisconsin, reduce nitrate concentration in surface water and groundwater, and improve producer profitability. Portage Russet and Clearwater Russet potatoes are shown as treated with Excavator from Meristem Crop Performance, and with a combination of Excavator and Bayer's Velum® Rise fungicide/nematicide.

Above Right: Jon Akins (left) and Ryan Meredith of Tessenderlo Kerley Inc.-NovaSource provide an overview of the company's portfolio of crop protection products for attendees of the Innovation Hub Field Day.