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Coloma Farms

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A Recipe For Success

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A Recipe For Success

Potatoes grown with fewer and safer crop protectants are the result of a collaborative effort among Wisconsin growers, researchers, and the environmental community.

By Rosemary O. Gordon
Managing Editor

TAKE a group of progressive potato growers, like those in the Wisconsin Potato and Vegetable Growers Association (WPVGA), and add a team of knowledgeable extension specialists from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Next, blend in the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and the International Crane Foundation (ICF). What is this a recipe for, you may ask? Well, it is a recipe for success.



Andy Diercks

On the surface, this collaboration — the Healthy Grown program — appears to promote the concept of producing potatoes using fewer crop protectants. When you delve into the topic further, what emerges may be a viable production method and a way to fill a marketing niche.

Hitting The Store Shelves

The tangible results of the program are bags of Wisconsin potatoes marketed under the producers' own Healthy Grown label. The product appeared in select stores

east of the Mississippi River this past winter.

The bags carry the Panda logo of the WWF, an organization that works to protect the world's wildlife. The WWF supports Protected Harvest, the independent, nonprofit organization that certifies the potatoes were produced under strict growing standards. The ICF is involved in bringing ecosystem standards into the program.

USDA, one of the funding agencies for Healthy Grown, invested more than \$1 million in the project over the last few years. Research also was supported by grants from EPA, WPVGA, the Joyce Foundation, American Farmland Trust, and the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection.

The collaboration began in the mid-'90s, but the effort really started in the '70s with the start of IPM programs, says Michael Fitzner, national program leader with the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service.

"The WWF insisted on developing some real credible data to show the impact

of this collaboration in terms of reducing toxic chemicals," he explains. A toxicity index was developed and the group identified some key active ingredients it wanted to eliminate from the system.

WPVGA was way out front with this and they took some heat from growers in other potato-growing regions, says Fitzner. They saw the program as a potential way to carve out marketshare and help the environment at the same time.

Those involved with the program say it's a model for identifying ecologically sound methods of food production. By following an intensive pest management program, Wisconsin potato growers reduced their pesticide use by 500,000 pounds between 1997 and 1999.



A Grower's View

If this sounds like a lot of work, well it is. Andy Diercks, president of the WPVGA, says growing under the Healthy Grown standards is more expensive and significantly more time-consuming. Diercks works at Coloma Farms in Coloma, WI, with his father Steve and uncle Mike where they manage 900 acres of potatoes and 1800 acres of rotation crops each year. The three of them share the load of more intensive management and record keeping, while independent crop consultants and University of Wisconsin-Madison students handle the increased field scouting needs. In addition, the Healthy Grown potatoes must be separated from the noncertified ones during grading, packaging, and in storage.

The extra time has not daunted the group of about 18 growers who are committed to the production method. Coloma Farms is planning to have 300 acres certi-



fied this season, and Diercks believes the extra effort is worth it.

“Farming has a pretty bad rap in regard to using pesticides,” he says. “Following this program is the right thing to do. For us to be sustainable in the future, we need to move this way.”

The biggest benefit that might come from this project, Diercks says, is a shift in conventional agriculture. “In our arena, it’s just potatoes, but Protected Harvest is looking at the big picture, and I think they have the right goals in mind. They would like to see conventional agriculture move to a more environmentally sustainable place. That is why we have made this push to move Wisconsin potato production in that direction.”

The Wisconsin growers thought they would have a better chance of having the product accepted by the consumer if they all marketed the potatoes under the same brand name, Healthy Grown, and used the same bags. The bags with the Protected Harvest stamp on them will give the product some visibility and provide a consistent message, comments Diercks.

The Nuts And Bolts

In order to receive the Protected Harvest stamp, growers must follow biointensive IPM (bioIPM) standards. These standards are divided into sections, including scouting and pest management; insect, disease, and weed management; storage management; and soil and water quality management. The group also is beginning to develop an in-depth ecosystem section.

To obtain certification, growers must earn a specified number of points. Points are accumulated for choosing crop protectants that are the least harsh on the environment, says Deana Sexson, associate researcher at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Sexson has been working with the growers for the past couple of years. They must obtain a minimum number of points in each of the sections as well as a total score requirement.

Diligent scouting is one aspect of the point system. Growers have to scout at least once a week. “They get points when

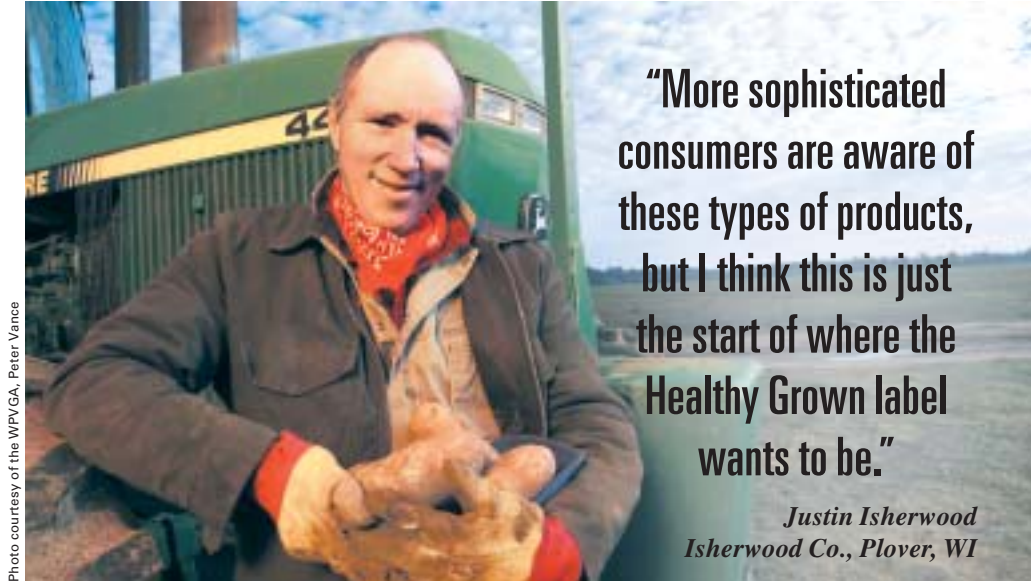


Photo courtesy of the WPI/GA, Peter Vance

“More sophisticated consumers are aware of these types of products, but I think this is just the start of where the Healthy Grown label wants to be.”

**Justin Isherwood
Isherwood Co., Plover, WI**

they go out and scout for the right things at the right times,” she says.

Earning bonus points also is an option. One way to earn extra points is to try new and different weed control measures. Sexson cites smother cropping as an example.

The drawback, she says, is that smother cropping is time-consuming. The process requires a grower to seed a “fast plant” above his potato seed. The fast plant grows, then dies when the weeds come up, killing the weeds.

Managing Pests

One of the keys for Wisconsin potato growers participating in the Healthy Grown program is to apply the following bioIPM techniques to their farms:

- **scouting and spot-treating pests using predictive models that show when pests are most problematic**
- **using intensive crop rotations**
- **adopting newer, softer chemistries**
- **keeping detailed records**

Softer Options

Most growers are able to earn the requisite number of points, but the toxicity portion poses more difficulties, she says.

Finding softer alternatives isn’t always easy. In fact, one Wisconsin potato grower, Justin Isherwood of Isherwood Co. in Plover, ran into some trouble with that this growing season. Last year, he devoted his entire potato crop to the Healthy Grown product. This year he had to reduce his acreage because of pest trouble.

His Healthy Grown crop was reduced to

60 acres because of an invasion of Colorado potato beetles. Isherwood used softer chemistries, but ran out of his supply and had to turn to other products that aren’t accepted in the program. As a result, some of his acres were rendered ineligible.

Because many of the softer chemistries are more expensive, growers are trying to recoup some of that expense by charging \$1 more per cwt. When the potatoes were introduced last year, the going price for conventional potatoes was good for the first time in five years, says Diercks.

Growers and brokers were simply pleased to be making a profit, so there was not a big push to sell the product at a premium.

Diercks wants to make it clear, however, that this effort is not about the money. “Nobody is going to get rich growing Healthy Grown, even if we can get the premium we want,” he says. “We want to make the change, but we need to maintain some profitability as well. The group is in it because it is the right thing to do.”

Many of the growers apparently agree. Sexson predicts that there will be about 6000 acres certified this year, up from 4800 in 2001. She also says that the format for the bioIPM program is very adaptable. In fact, Protected Harvest is expected to begin working with tomato growers in Florida next year.

In Wisconsin, Sexson says, they are working to develop Healthy Grown standards for other crops including canning crops, snap beans, and sweet corn.

For more information on the project, go to the University of Wisconsin’s Web site, ipcm.wisc.edu/bioipm.

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