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The EPA and DEC Meet Agriculture Face-to-Face in Upstate New York Tour

by Linda McCandless



(foreground, r-l) Dr. Helene Dillard (Dept. Plant Pathology, NYSAES, Geneva) points out symptoms of white mold in cabbage to Dr. Robert Epstein (USDA ARS), Fred Fladd (Cornell Cooperative Extension), and Pamela Hurley (US EPA) at Ed Hansen Farms in Stanley, NY.
(CREDIT: J.Ogrodnick/NYSAES/Cornell)



(left-right) NYS Assemblyman Craig Doran (District 129) and Dr. Alan Taylor (Dept. Horticulture, NYSAES, Geneva) listen while a grower describes his processing vegetable operation in Ontario County.
(CREDIT: J.Ogrodnick/NYSAES/Cornell)

Geneva, NY - Under the Food Quality Protection Act (FQPA) of 1996, federal and state regulators from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and NYS Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) are making thousands of decisions, impacting millions of acres, and affecting the production of tons of food. As they evaluate which chemicals will be available to fight disease and insect pests in fruits and vegetables, they are affecting agribusiness for decades.

But, many regulators readily admit they have minimal experience with production agriculture. They have advanced degrees in economics, chemistry, or law, but can't tell you what an acre of land looks like or the difference between field and sweet corn. Not only that, but their vision of New York tends to be "Big Apple" - not the \$440 million fruit and vegetable industry of New York that feeds the entire Northeast Corridor and extends far beyond Manhattan.



Bruce Austic (*with megaphone*), producer of dry beans, processing vegetables and field crops in Interlaken, NY, describes how he relies on a private crop consultant to scout his fields and tell him when and if pesticides should be applied. At this farm stop, Robin Bellinder underscored the economic impact the FQPA is already having on dry and snap bean growers in New York due to the loss of the herbicide Reflex. Lee Stivers, one of the tour organizers, faces the crowd(*center*), along with Dr. George Abawi (*arms folded*) (Dept. Plant Pathology, NYSAES, Geneva).
(CREDIT: J.Warholic/NYS Veg Growers)



Robert Holm (Associate Executive Director, IR-4, USDA) explains the important role the IR-4 program plays in collecting data in support of pesticide labels for fruit and vegetable crops. Behind him are some of Gro-Moore Farms' (Rush, NY) 25 acres of strawberries. According to George Moore, Jr., the lack of available herbicide options makes weed control an expensive, time consuming headache for strawberry growers.
(CREDIT: J.Warholic/NYS Veg Growers)

Lee Stivers and Laura Pedersen from Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE), and various commodity groups in New York set out to alter that vision during the "Beyond the Big Apple Tour," August 11-13, when they brought regulators, regulated and researchers face to face in upstate New York for the first time ever.

Over 25 federal and state regulators toured eight counties in the Empire State, making over 20 stops in orchards, fields, vineyards, wineries, and processing plants, exchanging information with growers, researchers, and food processors. They gained first-hand knowledge about how growers make pest management decisions, what affects food quality, and how vulnerable agriculture is to insects, diseases, and weather.

"New York farmers use pesticides sparingly," said Helene Dillard, chairman of the plant pathology department at the New York State Agricultural Experiment Station, one of 45 Cornell University researchers and extension agents involved on the tour. "No grower wants nor can afford to do 'recreational spraying!'"

Dillard echoed a point made repeatedly during the tour: chemicals are only one of the tools that growers use from an integrated pest management toolbox that includes biological



"First, I'm a businessman. Second, I'm a farmer," states Dale Hemminger (*with the megaphone*) of Hemdale Farms, Seneca Castle, and producer of snap beans, carrots, beets, and sweet corn, as he describes to the group of federal and state regulatory officials how pest management and pesticide regulations affect his ability to stay in business. Looking on are (to Dale's left) Mark James (Finger Lakes Region Farm Bureau) and tour organizer Laura Pedersen.

(CREDIT: J.Ogrodnick/NYSAES/Cornell)



If not controlled, tiny soil-dwelling worms called nematodes can turn a perfect carrot into an unsightly lump of tangled roots which no one would buy. Dr. George Abawi (*with megaphone*) (Dept. Plant Pathology, NYSAES, Geneva) illustrates how growers can control this pest through an integrated approach using crop rotation, variety selection, and timely application of pesticides. (CREDIT: J.Ogrodnick/NYSAES/Cornell)

controls and various other cultural options. If growers are forced to rely on fewer chemicals, they say they will have to use larger quantities to affect increasingly resistant pests; pest outbreaks will occur more often; food quality will suffer; production costs will increase; consumers will pay more.

According to Lee Stivers, the purpose of the tour was two-fold: "to educate regulators about the diversity of agriculture in New York State and how and why we manage pests. Secondly, we wanted to educate growers about the FQPA and their role in the process."

"Sending the regulators out behind the barn with the regulated is not a new idea," said Jean Warholc, Executive Secretary, NYS Vegetable Growers Association. "States like California, Florida, and Michigan run similar tours-but this was a first for New York. It was a wonderful spectrum of farms and practices and crops-just an outstanding tour." Growers want regulators to make fair decisions based on "sound science" in a "transparent" process, she said.

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"We are impressed with how articulate, sophisticated and knowledgeable the New York growers are," said Rich Dumas, EPA team leader in the Special Review and Re-Registration Division of the Office of Pesticide Programs, during a stop at Empire Farm Days. "We are all learning just how varied and diversified agriculture is in New York. Usually, the regulators and the regulated fight out our differences inside the Beltway. In this setting, we are finding our goals are the same: to have a safe and plentiful food supply." And "minor crops" are an important part of that food supply, he said.

Almost every crop is classified "minor" in New York-at least compared to national acreages of soy, cotton, or wheat-but all the growers on the tour made the point that the crops they grew represent a major investment and

a livelihood, whether it is apples, grapes, beans, onions, potatoes, cabbage, any number of other crops, or a combination.

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Under the provisions of the FQPA, the EPA will re-establish tolerances for 9,000 pesticides for major and minor crops over a period of nine years by calculating and reviewing risk assessment and toxicology data. "Minor" crops are particularly vulnerable because chemical companies and commodity groups put their resources into labeling for "major" crops. And, when data is inconclusive or absent-as is frequently the case in these relatively low-acreage crops, when farmers are afraid to provide data, or don't know the formats required to do so-the regulators apply "worst case" formulas and "throw the baby out with the bath water," as one grower put it. Risk reassessment are currently being established for the organophosphates and carbamates.

As part of their land grant mission, researchers at Cornell University generate and assess data. They are major contributors to the "sound science" necessary for "sound" decision-making.

"The College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, the Experiment Stations at Geneva and Ithaca and CCE have a significant role to play in meeting the research and education needs to comply with the FQPA," said Daryl Lund, dean of Cornell's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, in Batavia, during the tour. "It will require partnerships between the public and private sectors to maintain an economically vital, environmentally sound food system for the future."

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