

HEALTHY GROWN VEGETABLES: WHERE ARE WE GOING?

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Potatoes are an intensively managed, high value crop that has traditionally relied heavily on pesticides. In the 1980s Wisconsin farmers became concerned with environmental impact of such practices and worked intensively with the University to reduce pesticide reliance. In 1996, the potato growers sought to expand the scope of this work and entered into a unique partnership with the World Wildlife Fund to further reduce pesticide reliance. Stringent IPM standards were developed by participating growers and the University. An independent certification body was established to chart progress (Protected Harvest) and enable certified growers to market under the nation's first eco-brand for potatoes (Healthy Grown).

The results achieved by the program have been impressive thus far. Approximately 10% of the Wisconsin's fresh market potato farmers have participated in the program. These farmers have achieved a remarkable 64% reduction in the toxicity of pesticidal inputs compared with the general population in the first 3 years of the Healthy Grown program. Within this very select group of participating farmers, adoption of biologically-based IPM has increased by 12% in 3 years and pesticide toxicity has declined a further 22%. These results were recognized nationally in 2003 when the Partnership of farmers received one of the prestigious USDA Secretary's Honor Awards for Maintaining and Enhancing the Nation's Natural Resources and Environment.

This unique Partnership and its participating farmers are now expanding the program to develop measurable standards for ecosystem and wildlife enhancement with cooperative projects restoring wetlands, savannah, prairie, and woodlands in 2003. The potato production system with its unique balance of production agriculture and undisturbed wetland and woodland ecosystems is ideally positioned to showcase this work and they have been in the forefront in hosting local, state and national tours to promote the concept of environmentally friendly production and the attendant benefits associated with natural resource preservation.

The impact of this potato program, pioneered by progressive farmers, is now beginning to expand into other commodities in other regions of the country. Active programs, based on the Wisconsin Potato Partnership model, are also being pursued for wine grapes in the Lodi-Woodbridge area of California, vegetable processed into baby food by Gerber, tree fruit from California, tomatoes grown in Florida, and sweet potatoes in the southeastern United States.

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