

# West Virginia Department of Agriculture

Walt Helmick, Commissioner



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## NICHOLAS COUNTY POTATO FARM HAS TOP NOTCH HARVEST

**Charleston, W.Va.** – When Jerry and Stephanie Ward retired in 2015, they traded in long-haul trucking for potato farming.

“Jerry just can’t sit still,” Stephanie said of her husband who was on the road non-stop for 14 years. “He got antsy after retirement and this potato program caught his eye.”

Jerry heard about the West Virginia Department of Agriculture’s Potato Pilot Project, in partnership with the West Virginia Conservation Agency, last year. He watched closely as the farmers involved harvested their first crop. Jerry started doing some research of his own which led to some questions. Could their farm in Nicholas County support a large scale potato crop? Was there a market for locally grown potatoes? And how much time and money would it cost for the start-up? Jerry and Stephanie weighed their options and decided to plant potatoes.

“Stephanie and I planted 3,000 lbs. of seed potatoes this spring. We still don’t have the entire crop out of the ground but we’re at about 100 bushels of Kennebec potatoes,” said Jerry. “By the time we’re done harvesting, we expect to have 370 bushels. That’s on just an acre and a quarter.”

Agriculture Commissioner Walt Helmick couldn’t be more excited about the Ward’s decision. He visited the farm on a warm, autumn afternoon during harvest.

“It gives us some insight into what we’re doing, as a department, with the program,” stressed Helmick, sitting on a sofa in the Ward’s living room. “To see the enthusiasm I’ve seen from this family, it energizes us. People are real excited about what the WVDA is doing and they want to be a part of where we are heading.”



**Jerry and Stephanie Ward of Nicholas County are harvesting their first crop of potatoes which they have sold entirely by word of mouth.**



The Wards plan to expand next season.

“We have about 30 acres of tillable land. We can do more potatoes. It’s something easy to grow that the deer don’t eat,” said Jerry.

This year’s harvest at the Ward farm was sold entirely through word of mouth. Neighbors told neighbors and people showed up on the farm to buy in bulk or just a few potatoes at a time. Jerry wanted to hear from the commissioner what happens when he harvests 2,000 bushels of potatoes in years to come.

Commissioner Helmick stressed the department has a plan. The WVDA opened its first aggregation center in Huntington back in June. Equipment is in place to sort, wash and bag potatoes. At least three other aggregation centers are planned for other parts of the state (Charleston, Pruntytown and Beckley) with additional centers being considered in other regional sites as well. As for marketing those potatoes, Helmick stressed the department has a strategy in place.

“We have made the contacts for our farmers to sell their potatoes to wholesalers in West Virginia, our county school systems, and both chain and individual grocers,” Helmick stated. “it’s been going very well and sales are brisk.”

Helmick also said he would like to see a facility open here in the Mountain State to produce WV-made potato salad and eventually harvest and bag enough potatoes to sell in every grocery store throughout the state.

“We want to see West Virginia farmers feeding West Virginia consumers,” stressed Helmick.

Jerry and Stephanie couldn’t agree more. “We see great potential. We wouldn’t be growing potatoes if we didn’t.”

For more information on the WVDA potato pilot project, contact Communications Director Butch Antolini at (304)-558-3708 or [bantolini@wvda.us](mailto:bantolini@wvda.us).



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