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WVDA Seeking Growers for Strawberry Festival Sale

Charleston, W.Va. - Fresh, local strawberries are needed for this year's West Virginia Strawberry Festival to stock a "Strawberry Market" during the event. The sale will take place Friday, May 20th and Saturday, May 21st of the weeklong event which begins May 13th and runs through the 21st.

The West Virginia Strawberry Festival board, the City of Buckhannon and the West Virginia Department of Agriculture (WVDA) are working cooperatively with private farmers to put on the sale, which seeks to boost the amount of West Virginia strawberries consumed at the long-running event.

"West Virginia has such diverse terrains and climates throughout the state. This event is a great opportunity for West Virginia's farmers to showcase the variety of crops that can be grown locally," said Commissioner of Agriculture Kent Leonhardt. "For residents of the area, it's a reminder of West Virginia's agricultural heritage."

While local growers have continued to produce small amounts of berries for the traditional strawberry auction and other festival events, retail sales of West Virginia berries have been nearly non-existent for decades.

Over the past three years, a limited number of growers have provided berries for the WVDA-organized sale. But the demand has proven far greater than the supply. However, the increasing prevalence of high tunnels - low-cost, unheated greenhouse structures - makes fresh berries in mid-May a more practical proposition than in the past.

"The festival falls quite early to have field-grown berries and we've only been able to put together about 200 pints each of the past three years," said WVDA sale organizer Buddy Davidson. "But we really saw a jump in the number of growers participating last year so we might be on the verge of having a really big year in 2017."

At one time, the Upshur County area grew a surplus of strawberries that were shipped out of state following the festival. One undated historical report in the archives of the Upshur County Historical Society notes that more than 1,500 gallons of berries were shipped to Pittsburgh. It also said that farmers would be supplying cherries, raspberries and currants "later in the season." But over the years, that supply was replaced by berries from large-scale, out-of-state producers.

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