

News Release

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DEMAND HIGH FOR WEST VIRGINIA BERRIES AT 2015 STRAWBERRY FESTIVAL

Locally grown berries sold at twice the speed they did at the 2014 West Virginia Strawberry Festival (WVSF), and even more are needed for next year. Last year was the first time in decades that local strawberries were sold at a retail location – thanks to an initiative by Commissioner of Agriculture Walt Helmick – and consumers came looking for them.

“We had roughly the same number of berries as last year, but we sold them in half the time it took last year,” said sale organizer Buddy Davidson. “People who understand the difference between a 10-day-old berry trucked in from California and a West Virginia berry picked the day before showed up early and typically bought multiple packages. I think we could easily have sold twice as many.”

The biggest roadblock to the sale continues to be scarcity of ripe, local berries. Davidson said he thinks growers could have strawberries ready if they plan appropriately and use high tunnels or other season-extending technologies, but more of them need to become aware of the opportunity.

“This is an event that will support a premium price for local berries, and it’s a great chance for growers to get the growing season started on the right foot with a nice, profitable sale,” he noted. “I continue to talk with growers who are unaware of the sale and who really don’t understand what a substantial event the Strawberry Festival is. I really think we’re on the verge of this event blowing up next year, though.”

Another roadblock is that Buckhannon residents have already bought strawberries for their celebrations.

“It’s been so long since there was any substantial influx of local berries into Buckhannon that people go the Walmart and buy a flat of berries ahead of time and then aren’t willing to buy the local ones,” he said. “Hopefully next year even more people will be planning to use local berries and we’ll have plenty of berries to sell them.”

Davidson thanked the Strawberry Festival Board, the City of Buckhannon, the Upshur County FFA and members of the local media.

“To a person, everyone I have approached about this project has been 100 percent supportive. Everyone thinks it’s a great idea and everyone wants to see it grow. I’m confident more growers will be involved next year, and I think we really can bring local berries back to the West Virginia Strawberry Festival in a big way,” he said. He urged any growers with questions to contact him at 304-541-5932.

He also noted that fresh berries and other produce will soon be showing up in farmers’ markets throughout the state. The more adventurous can visit one of the state’s many “pick-your-own”

operations, a list of which can be found at
http://www.wvagriculture.org/Brochures/Foods_and_Things/Pick_Your_Own.html.