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STRAWBERRY GROWERS NEEDED FOR FESTIVAL MARKET

Fresh, local strawberries are needed for this year's West Virginia Strawberry Festival to stock a "Strawberry Market" planned for the May 9-17, 2015, event.

The Strawberry Festival board, the City of Buckhannon and the West Virginia Department of Agriculture (WVDA) are working cooperatively with private farmers to have local berries for sale at locations throughout West Virginia's "strawberry city."

"This great festival is an excellent opportunity for local farmers to benefit from the visitors that pour into Upshur County each May," said Commissioner of Agriculture Walt Helmick. "But like the other tremendous food-related opportunities in our state, we need more growers to become involved."

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 has been nearly non-existent for decades. At one time, the 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.

However, local berries made a reappearance in 2014. WVDA project coordinator Buddy Davidson said that the few berries provided by state growers sold well last year.

"We sold 200 pints of berries at quite a premium over farmers' market prices, and that was only at one location and only over two days," Davidson said. "I think we can duplicate that number at three or four other locations in Buckhannon."

He noted that the timing of the festival has been problematic for growers, who have had a difficult time having berries ripe in mid-May. The increasing prevalence of high tunnels – low-cost, unheated greenhouse-type structures – makes fresh berries in mid-May a more practical proposition than in past years. In fact, many farmers report using the tunnels to grow some types of produce year-round.

He noted that the WVDA will be able to purchase berries up-front as a way of simplifying the financial aspects of the project. Berries will be then be priced to recoup the price paid to growers, with a little bit left over to donate to the Upshur County FFA club for helping with the sale.

"We serve two goals with this project," said Davidson. "One is to help farmers take direct advantage of the pricing opportunity they have with a large, popular namesake festival. The other is to educate high school students about agriculture and business, and steer some of them to become food producers in the future. The age of the average farmer in West Virginia and the U.S. continues to climb and few young people see farming as a viable career option, but it is, he noted.

"People will always need to eat and more and more, they prefer to eat food produced close to where they live," Davidson said.

For more information, contact WVDA Communications Officer Buddy Davidson at 304-558-3708, 304-541-5932 (cell), or bdavidson@wvda.us.

The West Virginia Department of Agriculture protects plant, animal and human health through a variety of scientific, regulatory and consumer protection programs, as mandated by state law. The Commissioner of Agriculture is one of six statewide elected officials in West Virginia. For more information, visit www.wvagriculture.org.