Prepared Jan 24, 2024 by R. Sideman

Impact Assessment - LNE20-403

In January 2024, the team responsible for the NE SARE grant LNE20-403, *"Advancing Strawberry Production in the Northeast",* conducted a survey of strawberry growers in the northeast region to assess the impacts of our project. Our goal with the survey was to reach commercial strawberry growers throughout the region, determine the degree to which they participated in our project activities, and determine whether they have made changes that have affected their strawberry yields, fruit quality, labor, pest management, and ultimately, revenue from strawberry production.

As with the larger survey about production practices that we conducted at the start of the project in 2020, we distributed through listservs, social media accounts, and direct mailings based in NH, VT, MA, and NY, that reach growers throughout the northeast region. We estimate that well over 3000 commercial vegetable and berry growers viewed the survey request. We received a total of 27 responses from commercial strawberry growers from VT, MA, NY, NH, and CT. This was a somewhat lower turnout than desired. While a limited sample, the responses did resonate with our impressions of grower impacts. Due to time constraints, we did not attempt to increase response rate beyond the initial survey push. Respondents did represent over 84 acres of strawberries, and 63% of respondents did participate in one or more of our project activities (twilight meetings, workshops, presentations, accessing our strawberry production guide, etc.).

Results/Takehome Messages:
Responding growers did use the products of our project. The largest percentage accessed our revised '*Strawberry Production Guide for the Northeast, Midwest, and Eastern Canada' (44%).* Others read articles written by team members (33%), participated in individual discussions with team members (26%), attended workshops/roundtables/twilight meetings (30%), and/or hosted twilight meetings or on-farm experiments (15%).
Responding growers did make innovations that improved their strawberry production. Significant proportions of all respondents indicated that they made changes that increased yields (33%), fruit quality (30%), winter survival (19%), reduced labor (30%) and reduced pesticide applications (19%) – and these percentages were slightly higher for participants in our project than for respondents overall.
Innovations did not necessarily result in increased revenue from strawberries. We directly asked respondents whether their strawberry revenue increased, decreased, or stayed the same over the past 4 years – and the reason for any change reported. For project participants, revenue mostly stayed the same (70%), or decreased (24%), with only 6% reporting increased revenue. Increases were due primarily to increases in planted acreage; decreases were due mostly to weather-related challenges, or, in one case, increased emphasis on other farm enterprises.

Our original performance target was: *100 growers with a total of 50 acres of fruiting strawberries will each adopt one new practice to increase yields, fruit quality and/or winter survival of strawberries, prolong the fruiting season, and reduce pesticide applications or labor. 50 growers will report an average increase in annual revenues of $2000 each.*

Strawberry production is inherently risky. A short harvest season, highly perishable fruit that are vulnerable to a variety of weather conditions, high labor requirements, and a diverse pest complex are all factors that make strawberry a difficult crop to grow. Growers in the northeast U.S. use a wide variety of production systems and are constantly innovating – and we know that they are turning to the information and outreach resources that we produced in this project for guidance.

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From our assessment, we know that 17 growers with a total of 52 acres each adopted at least one practice that increased yields, fruit quality, and/or winter survival of strawberries, prolonged the fruiting season, or reduced pesticide applications or labor. Only 7 growers (7% of our respondents) reported increases in annual strawberry revenues; however, because our survey respondents only represent a small subset of all commercial producers in NY and New England (just under 2%), it is very possible that 50 growers who engaged in some way with our project did increase revenues by the target amount.