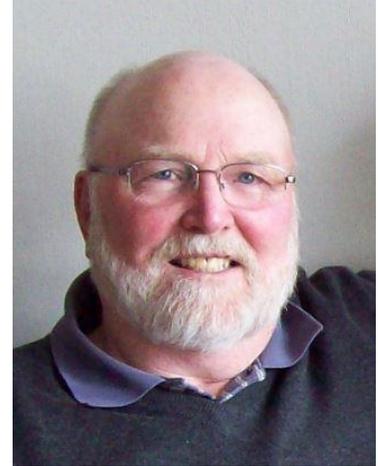


CLIMATE TALK

Climate Change: A Local Fruit Farmer's Perspective

Rick Dale
Bayfield



As a farmer, I can't help "keeping an eye on the sky" for what the weather will bring. My business, my way of life, my very survival as a farmer, and the future for my children depends on the weather. Whenever the present experience is very far outside of expected norms for very long, for better or for worse, I become nervous. Agriculture depends on the regular cycles, the rhythms, the steady heart-beat of nature for its outcomes.

Weather patterns are changing. Some who live in this short-summer-season part of the world might even say for the better. The USDA agricultural climate zone rating for our area was changed recently from zone 4 to zone 5 to reflect this change (zone 4 requiring more cold hardy crop choices than the warmer zone 5). We began our blueberry enterprise 40 years ago by planting only the most winter-hardy of northern adapted varieties, but now we can successfully cultivate many of the "industry standard" northern highbush types. In fact, for the last three years our production per acre at Bayfield has out-paced the blueberry production average for Michigan fields.

But other climate change effects are troubling. Production has become more challenging as mild winters allow a larger "carry over" of traditional pests and disease. Our climate has become more habitable for a host of new exotic pests arriving annually from Asia and elsewhere: SWD, Marmorated Stink Bug, Japanese Beetle, Lantern Moth, and others on the way. Super-saturated soils from abnormal rainfall amounts exacerbate root-rot diseases. Long periods of wet foliage increase the pressure of fungal leaf, stem, and fruit diseases. Controls are time consuming and costly.

While we have not yet experienced the extreme heat, drought, and wildfires of the West, nor the destructive hurricanes, severe flooding, and rising sea levels of the Gulf and Atlantic states, our mid-continent location near to the Great Lakes has not spared us completely to date. Violent summer storms during the last three years have washed out the major highways that serve our area, each in their turn, closing affected roads for much of the harvest season, 40% of the market for our blueberry crop depends on people being able--or willing--to come to the farm during our harvest. Most of the remainder must be trucked to urban markets. Fresh fruit is perishable. Delays, detours, and rough temporary roads take a toll. Is it unreasonable to expect that we may experience a future season when ALL of the major routes that connect Bayfield to the larger region may be affected at the same time? At the very least, it is simply not sustainable to have to repair or replace major highway infrastructure on an annual basis.

Our climate is changing and life as we have known it will change as well. How can we respond to slow or

mitigate this change? For starters, we must get serious about supporting science-based climate change policy. Immediately, we can ask Representative Duffy to support The Energy Innovation and Carbon Dividend Act (H.R. 763), introduced in this Congress with bipartisan support. How will we adapt to the change already taking place? As communities, we must embrace sustainability, and turn away from "growth economics". As individuals, this will ultimately mean that we must learn to live a meaningful life more simply.

Rick Dale is the founder and president of family-owned and operated Highland Valley Farm Inc. at Bayfield. A resident of the community for more than 40 years, he has served as an elected representative in municipal government and served on numerous public and private boards and committees. For the past 15 years he has served as a consultant for The United States Agency for International Development, providing agricultural enterprise development assistance to farmers recovering in conflict regions of our world.