

Lake Erie Regional Grape Program Hosts Hops Conference in Western New York

By Emily Knight

The Lake Erie Regional Grape Program, in conjunction with the NYS IPM Program, held the first annual Lake Erie Hops Conference at the Cornell Lake Erie Research and Extension Laboratory (CLEREL) in Portland, NY. The workshop was aimed toward those who are interested in hops production in the Lake Erie Region. Current growers and potential hops growers had the opportunity to learn about the history of hops in New York, opportunities with the Northeast Hops Alliance, preparation and considerations before planting hops, pest management, weed control, equipment for hops production, economics of hops productions, and marketing to brewers. The 122 participants also had the chance to collaborate with other growers from Pennsylvania, New York, and



Figure 1: Tim Weigle, NYS IPM Program, talks to participants about CLEREL's hop yard, constructed in 2011

Maryland while touring the hop yard at the CLEREL facility. Speakers included Steve Miller, (Madison County CCE Hops Educator), Tom Barse, (Northeast Hops Alliance President and Maryland hops grower), Tim Weigle, (NYS Integrated Pest Management Program), Nathan Perry, (Maryland hops grower), Kevin Martin, (LERGP, Penn State University), Mike Moorehead, (PA hop grower), and Ted Taft, (CLEREL). A Brewer Panel including headbrewer Dustrin Hazer of Southern Tier Brewing Co., Steve Spears of Dunkirk Home Brew, and Tom Barse of Mikhouse Brewery at Stillpoint Farm provided the audience a unique look into the potential marketing opportunities for hops in the region.

New York was once the top producer of hops in the United States before 1909 when mildews, the hop aphid, and prohibition practically wiped out all Northeast production. With today's new varieties, research, and the local foods movement, hops production has sprouted back to life in the Northeast. Nearly a century after its demise, farmers and brewers are working to revive the region's production of hops by harnessing today's movement for local and distinctive products. Tom Barse a Maryland hops



grower stated, "We used to grow it—it's nothing new—we just forgot how to do it."

For Pennsylvania grape grower Mike Moorehead, "growing hops was an easy decision, as they use a lot of similar equipment and tractors as grapes." For many farmers, hops are a way to diversify production. Yet, "Starting a hopyard is a high investment, comparable to a vineyard" said Steve Miller, Madison County CCE Hop Educator.

Unlike the large scale production in the Northwest that is sold primarily through brokers, Northeast growers market directly to brewers who are looking for the best quality and distinctive aroma hops. This poses several opportunities and challenges for growers in the Northeast. Whereas in the Northwest, around 30 families control the entire commodity, the Northeast will have 300 families involved in growing hops. Hop growers in the Northeast do not have the infrastructure for processing and storing hops as in the Northwest, and the market for wet hops (hops used in the brewing process directly after picking) is relatively small. This has led local growers to create their own designs or restore structures for small scale harvesting, processing, drying, and storing hops.

Kevin Martin, Business Management Extension Educator at CLEREL, said “If New York had large scale producers, that were successful, they would eliminate the advantage small producers have in New York.” With small scale producers, hop growers can thrive off the “Buy Local” movement and can market home-grown products to brewers.

New York hop growers have the opportunity to produce and market a product that once flourished in the area. Barse stated, “We think we can recreate from 100 years ago” the production and culture of hops growing in New York.