

Regionally specific postharvest guidance - Increased demand for year-round local food production has motivated an intensified focus on postharvest practices. Initial research and education by the proposing principal investigator and collaborators in the area of postharvest practices, especially regarding good agricultural practices, post-harvest processing and winter crop storage, has been well-received. However, the current knowledge in the field is based on larger-scale, less diversified operations than are common in the Northeast. Furthermore, there is limited intentional integration of individual research and extension efforts in the region. We need guidelines on region- and market-specific postharvest practice, since we have different climates, markets and varieties.

Research-based and data-driven operations - Diversified farmers in the Northeast lack research-based, regionally specific, scale-appropriate guidance about postharvest equipment and practices, variety-specific postharvest conditions, and information on sensitivity of crop quality to storage conditions. This group of stakeholders has indicated an increased interest in improving postharvest practices including curing, trimming, sorting, rinsing/washing, packing, storing, culling, adding value / processing, and marketing. A regionally integrated research and extension network would be best suited to delivering this programming.

Increased enterprise productivity - Existing postharvest guidance is broad; e.g. information on storage characteristics of specific varieties of potatoes, carrots, beets and other winter crops is lacking. Furthermore, seed supplier guidance materials relative to postharvest practices lack detail on specific varieties and are quite general. Having more information available would support higher-quality and longer duration storage results. Crop selection by growers often requires trial and error or word of mouth recommendations. This leads to poor predictability and reduced profitability of these diversified operations.

Activities to be Engaged in by Team Members Towards a More Complete Definition of the Program

We propose an in-person organizing meeting to develop a consolidated, regional vision for collaboration in postharvest research and extension. This would enable more effective follow-on meetings held via teleconference or web-conference in order to prepare a successful NIFA proposal and collaborate in general.

The primary purpose of the meeting is to enable a focused discussion of currently ad-hoc and disparate postharvest research, extension and education through-out the Northeast US. The meetings proposed would enable two dimensions of engagement; (1) a dedicated forum for sharing of past, current and proposed research and education among this cohort and (2) discussion and planning related to a coordinated and shared research and education facility focused on postharvest topics. A key outcome would be a consolidated statement of stakeholder needs and a list of initial research questions associated with those needs that such a collaborative facility could address.

This project would allow for an integrative, trans-disciplinary, strategic planning activity among collaborating postharvest research and extension professionals in the northeast US (VT, MA, NH, ME, CT, RI, and parts of NY) and potentially Quebec and the Atlantic Canadian Provinces with the immediate impact of articulating the need, scope and development plan for a regional postharvest research and extension center. The intent is to provide an opportunity to think collectively about the needs of the various stakeholders in order to collaboratively conduct appropriate future research in a central location. A concerted planning effort would help to define a larger project and future funding requirements, as well as outline a plan for execution of the idea. Defining the scope of research and extension activities to be performed within such a center will help to clearly plan for proper facilities and human resources as well as operating protocols and appropriate financial structures. The output of this activity would be useful for other regions with clusters of agricultural development who seek similar collaborative research centers.

-Chris