

Farmers' contributions keep lab viable

• Cornell's Hudson Valley facility survives funding cuts

By Dave Rosenberger, Peter Jentsch and Jeff Crist

At times during the past year, it seemed almost certain that the applied research and extension programs at Cornell's Hudson Valley Lab in Highland, New York, would be slashed due to budget shortfalls. In fact, there was a real possibility that the applied research programs might be eliminated completely.

Due to significant cutbacks in both federal and state funding over the past decade, Dean Kathryn Boor of Cornell's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences indicated that Cornell would reduce funding for the Hudson Valley Lab by nearly 50 percent beginning in July of 2014. One of the scientist positions was to be eliminated following the retirement of Dave Rosenberger, and the remaining \$270,000 in annual funding that CALS agreed to provide over the next five years would cover



only salaries for the remaining two scientists and two support positions.

The cutbacks in CALS funding meant that other sources of funding were needed to cover \$125,000 in annual expenses for overhead (utilities, maintenance, insurance) and operating costs formerly paid by annual allocations from CALS via the Geneva Experiment Station. Scientists at the Hudson Valley Lab have supported their own research programs via grants for many years, but grant funds designated for specific projects could not be used to cover the overhead and general operating expenses at the Hudson Valley Lab. It

was clear that an entirely new funding model was needed.

Cornell University has supported research efforts in the Hudson Valley ever since 1923 when the state legislature provided line-item funding for research to address specific problems unique to that part of the state. Cornell scientists worked from various rented facilities in the Hudson Valley from 1923 to 1964.

In the early 1960s, Hudson Valley fruit and vegetable growers created a non-profit corporation, purchased

See Lab, Page 10

Lab

Continued from Page 1

land in Highland, and constructed buildings to house offices, labs, and research equipment, thus creating the Hudson Valley Lab. The newly formed non-profit (Hudson Valley Research Laboratory, Inc., or HVRL) developed an agreement with CALS administrators wherein HVRL would maintain the new facility in return for modest rental payments from CALS. In return, CALS would furnish the lab, purchased additional land behind the lab for research orchards, and cover salaries and expenses for the researchers housed at the lab.

Over the past 50 years, scientists at the HVL developed quality research programs that provided significant benefits not only to fruit and vegetable growers in the Hudson Valley, but also for farmers in other parts of the state and throughout New England. Because of its southerly location within New York, the growing season begins earlier in the Hudson Valley, and many pests that invade from the south are detected in the Hudson Valley before

they appear in the rest of the state.

As a result, HVL scientists often functioned as an early-warning system for growers in other regions. HVL scientists benefitted from having an extension fruit specialist supported by Ulster County Cooperative Extension housed in the same building. Together, the horticulturist, entomologist, plant pathologist, and extension specialist at HVL formed an effective team that not only generated cutting edge research, but also conveyed the results of research and field observations to growers on a daily basis during critical parts of the season.

Given the reductions in CALS funding stipulated to begin in July, an industry fund-raising effort was initiated in mid December 2013 with the objective of generating at least the first \$125,000 in annual funding required for continuation of research programs at HVL.

The response from farmers was rapid and effective, generating an energy that ultimately converted some of the dubious into donors. By the end of February, Hudson Valley farmers along with contributing farmers in the Albany region, Champlain Valley, Long Island, and New England, had contributed \$160,000 toward

WANTED: Apple Wood

Virginia company looking to purchase apple wood by the truckload (22 tons or more).

Please contact:

Rod Smith

Waste Resources

3238 North Fork Rd.

Elliston, VA 24087

540-268-1296

continued operations at the Hudson Valley Lab. (Those contributions were in addition to \$29,780 that the same group of farmers contributed in January-February of 2013 to retire the 40-yr mortgage that HVRL had taken to enlarge the facility in 1974).

The vigorous and rapid industry response attracted the notice of other philanthropies, agricultural interest groups, and politicians in Albany. One foundation has committed to providing an additional \$300,000 in funding over the next three years. Ultimately, the groups involved in fund-raising and operating the Hudson Valley Lab are hoping to generate funding above and beyond the \$125K/yr. operating expenses so as to allow refilling of the third scientist position at the lab.

The industry response to the HVL funding challenge is especially notable considering the staffing transitions that are occurring at the Hudson Valley Lab. Peter Jentsch, entomologist, was appointed superintendent of the lab in November when Dave Rosenberger stepped down, after 23 years at the helm, in anticipation of his February 2014 retirement. Steve Hoying, horticulturist, announced that he would retire at the end of June 2014. Then Mike Fargione, the lab's highly regarded fruit extension specialist, resigned in November to accept his "dream job" in wildlife management at The Institute for Ecosystem Studies in Millbrook.

Despite the fact that three of the four key positions at the lab were being vacated, the industry voted with their checkbooks to say that regional research programs are essential for the success of agriculture in eastern New York.

The transition to the new funding partnership between CALS and the industry was not painless: it required a lot of work behind the scenes. An Executive Committee composed of CALS administrators and representatives from a wide range of Hudson Valley agricultural interests began meeting in November of 2012 to assess industry needs and consider options for new funding models. That committee met numerous times in

2013 before arriving at consensus on how industry funding for the Hudson Valley Lab should be handled and the responsibilities of both parties in the partnership.

The process benefited tremendously from having a pre-existing non-profit corporation (HVRL) that could assume responsibilities and liabilities involved in fund-raising and paying for operating expenses of the lab after June 30, 2014. The 6-member Board of Directors for HVRL met numerous times to define and review operational procedures for HVRL in its new role. That board then appointed a fund-raising committee comprised of industry leaders and the Hudson Valley Young Growers to provide leadership and "boots on the ground" for the fundraising campaign.

Although current efforts have raised more than the \$125K needed by HVRL for the first year of expenses under the new partnership, the fund-raising effort continues because, as stated above, funding beyond \$125K/yr. will be required if HVL is to be re-staffed with a full team. Current plans are to refill a position in plant pathology later this year, but that will leave a vacancy in horticulture that can be filled only via continued fund-raising. (Interviews will be scheduled soon to fill the extension position vacated by Mike Fargione.) Most of the fund-raising efforts to date focused on the lower Hudson Valley and the larger farms.

The HVL fund-raising committee encourages continued contributions from anyone who has benefitted from programs at the Hudson Valley Lab and who has not yet contributed.

Contributions should be payable to "Hudson Valley Research Laboratory, Inc." and should be mailed to: Donna Clark, Hudson Valley Lab, PO Box 727, Highland, NY 12528. Donors will receive receipts for the tax-deductible contribution. It is worth noting that, as part of the partnership arrangement with CALS, HVRL will be collecting the funds and paying bills directly, thereby avoiding any overhead or management charges that might apply if funding had been channeled through Cornell University.