Yes, We Can

One of my favorite stories as a kid was “The little engine that could.” I don’t know if I could relate to that small train so well because I was a short skinny kid, always trying to keep up with my three bigger, older siblings, or if it was because I’m a fifth generation Vermonter, and Vermonters are known for their stubbornness and determination. But I always had an affinity for that story with the success story of “I think I can, I think I can”, turning into “I thought I could, I thought I could” through hard work and determination.

I think it’s fair to say that the NYS Berry Growers Association has some similarities to the little engine that could. Yes, we’re a small organization. And we’re a fairly young organization compared to many grover organizations in the state. But we’ve got a big problem with a little insect called Spotted Wing Drosophila (SWD). Like the little train, we knew when to ask for help and the value of teamwork.

The NYS Berry Growers Organization was successful in obtaining a $200,000 allocation from the state legislature last spring for our battle against SWD. The Association was also instrumental in making the connections happen for an additional $85,000 in research funding from the NYS Farm Viability Institute. So how did we do it? First, we seized an opportunity to get the word out to decision makers in the state about the problem with SWD and its impact on the industry. Second, we knew we couldn’t do this ourselves, and we developed our team. That team is composed of the Berry Growers Association, the research and Extension team for berries at Cornell, staff at Ag and Markets, and our state legislators and their staff.

Our excellent research and Extension team put together a white paper outlining the problem and possible research objectives. Working with them, the Berry Growers edited, and edited, and edited some more to get the white paper into a potential plan of action, and then edited some more to transform it into a concise request for funding. We shared it with Ag and Markets, who loved the fact that we came to them with a plan ready to go. We visited with key legislators and told our stories about what SWD had done to our businesses in one year, and the impact it could have on rural economic development and quality of life issues for all growers and consumers in the state. And we educated our legislators that the Berry Growers Association believes in shared responsibility. Every single member of the NYSBGGA has 40% of their dues go into a research fund, and many members make voluntary contributions to the research fund on top of that.

But there are some problems, like SWD, that are bigger than an industry can take on by itself. The entire state benefits when agricultural industries thrive. The high school and college students working on my farm to pay for college benefit, the woman working in my farm store who is making ends meet while her husband has been laid off from his construction job benefits, the substitute teachers cabling together full-time work after being down-sized from their teaching jobs benefit, the urban customers buying my berries at the Troy Farmer’s Market benefit, and the nine year old that has “never tasted anything so good as these blueberries” benefits.

There has been a lot of discussion over the last year about how to fund applied research for agriculture in NYS. There has been a lot of disagreement on how to proceed. If I had the answers, I probably wouldn’t be farming, but here are a few observations: 1. New York is an incredibly diverse agricultural state, so don’t expect to come up with a “one size fits all” plan. 2. The state thrives when agriculture thrives, so when we have issues that are bigger than what an industry can handle by itself, we shouldn’t feel bad about requesting help from the state. 3. Agriculture needs to invest in ourselves. Why should taxpayers pay to help an industry that won’t demonstrate that it believes in itself by using some of its own dollars for research? 4. We need to offer our help to other agricultural industries, legislators, and state agencies to work in a truly cooperative way.

The phrase “I’m only a phone call away” can do wonders to build a working relationship with key legislators and state agencies to work in a truly cooperative way.

(Continued on p.2)
work ing team. 5. We need to put together teams to tackle some of the issues facing the different agricultural industries, and they need to be true TEAMS where everyone is looking forward and working for the same goal. As an advocate for my industry, the last thing I have patience for are those who immediately start listing all the hurdles that we must jump over.

Yes, it’s a lot of work. Yes, it will take time. But having an open mind, a creative mind, a strategic thinking mind, is what is going to provide success in the future. It’s easier to be the large engines and not go over the mountain because you won’t or “can not”. As for me, I’ll put my money on the little engine that thinks it can any day.

Dale Ila M. Riggs
President, NYS Berry Growers Association
The Berry Patch, Stephentown NY