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STATE SENATOR

Op-Ed: Wisconsin – Yes We Cran!

As September begins, the leaves start to change color, the mornings are a little cooler, and harvest time is right around the corner. For many farmers, it's time to head for the fields, but for the men and women who grow cranberries, it's time to pull on some waders and hit the water.

In 2017, I had the opportunity to help harvest cranberries at Dempze Cranberry Co. in Biron, where I experienced first-hand the work that goes into this important Wisconsin industry. The owners, Rocky and Jamie Biegel, and their employees work long hours to gather the ripe berries that will one day become cranberry sauce, juice, or sweet and dried cranberries. I learned that working in the flooded bogs is tiring, but rewarding work – although I didn't expect to be joined in the water by the dozens of brown spiders that are apparently common to the veteran harvesters with whom I was working. That took a little getting used to!

The year 2019 marks the 25th consecutive year that Wisconsin is the national leader in cranberry production. Sixty percent of the nation's cranberries come from this state, but only twenty Wisconsin counties produce them. I'm proud to represent five of the top ten cranberry producing counties – including the top three, Wood, Jackson, and Monroe. Cranberries have a nearly \$1 billion economic impact on Wisconsin, and the cranberry industry is responsible for approximately 4,000 jobs.

Many of those jobs are in processing, which I've also had a chance to experience first-hand. According to data from the Wisconsin State Cranberry Growers Association, only five percent of the state's crop is sold as fresh berries – which means that the vast majority of our cranberries are sold in other forms like juice, sauce, or sweet and dried. As part of my "On the Job" I worked one day each at Badger State Fruit Processing in Pittsville and at Mariani Packing in Wisconsin Rapids. In addition, I've toured Nutrativa Global in Nekoosa. Each of these companies, along with others in the region, has come up with ways to harness the healthy benefits of cranberries into something special from Wisconsin – food products that are enjoyed worldwide.

So, the next time you drink a glass of cranberry juice or pack some raisins in your child's lunch, take pride in the fact that those products are grown and processed right here in Central Wisconsin by our friends and neighbors. Or, even better yet, join me and thousands of others in Warrens for the annual Cranberry Festival, which takes place this year between September 27th and 29th – it's sure to be a great time.