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Cranberry harvest season in full swing for 5th-generation owned company

WALDY DIEZ Staff Writer Oct 18, 2017



Pine Island Cranberry Company workers push cranberries floating on top of the bog into a bog side cleaner. Tractors drag a yellow boom around the bog to section it off for workers to harvest. Once the berries go into the bog side cleaner, they are washed and sent into a grain truck that will eventually go to the Ocean Spray receiving center, also in Chatsworth. Oct. 17, 2017 (Craig Matthews / Staff Photographer)

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CHATSWORTH — Six Pine Island Cranberry Co. workers, dressed head to toe in protective gear and waders, pushed 300-400 pound reel harvesters, or “knocking machines,” through thigh-high water in a bog, while a lead man checked for deep holes Tuesday.

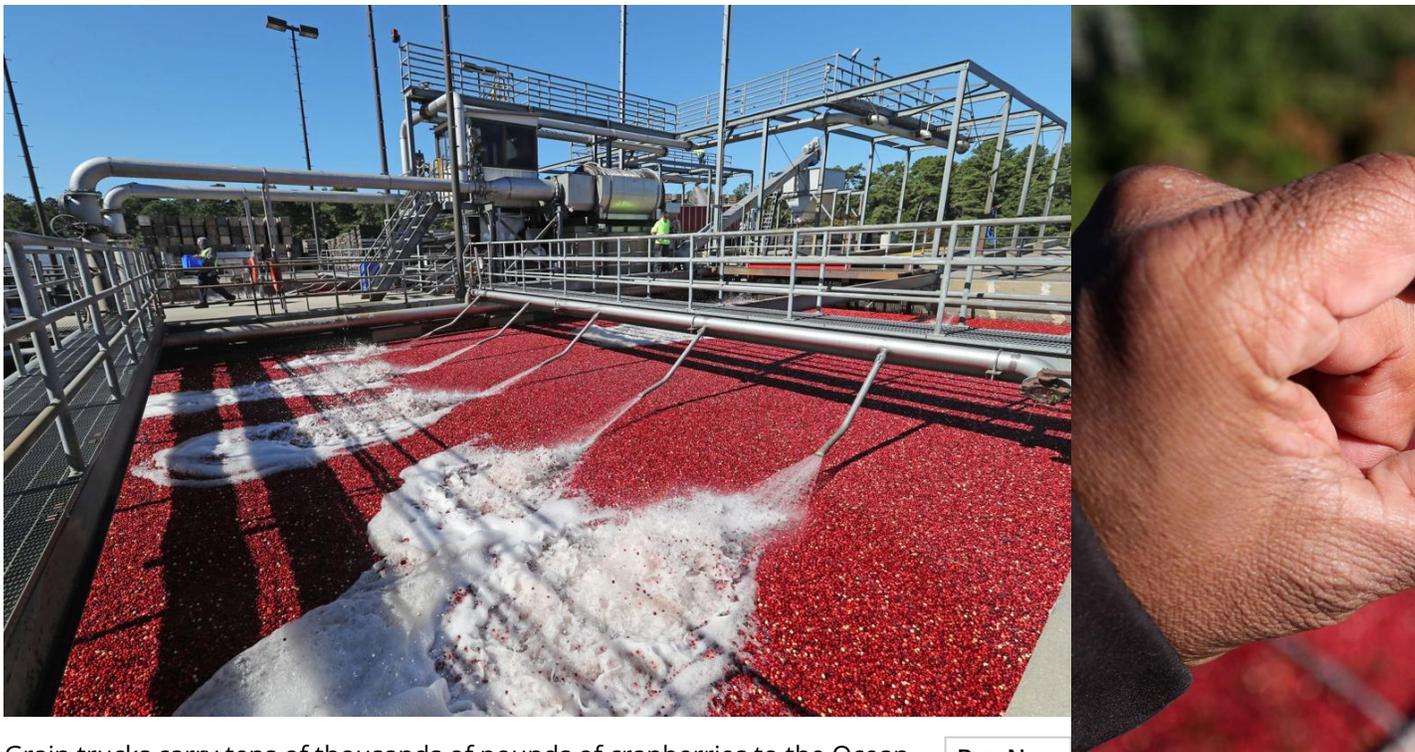
They were wet-harvesting just one cranberry bog on the 14,000-acre farm. The farm has a 10-to-1 ratio of protective land to producing bogs.

“We need to protect the water supply and water source,” said PICC Social Media Coordinator Stefanie Haines, a fifth-generation grower.

South Jersey cranberry harvest mid-way through season

Pine Island Cranberry Company is halfway through its wet-harvest season. It is the largest cranberry company in New Jersey. The state is the third-largest producer behind Wisconsin and Massachusetts.

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Grain trucks carry tens of thousands of pounds of cranberries to the Ocean Spray receiving center in Chatsworth to be washed, sorted and sent to a freezer in Philadelphia or a plant in Middleboro, Massachusetts.

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Cranberries need warm days a brighter red.

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The Hog Wallow cranberry farm, the largest in New Jersey and one of the largest producers in the world, began in 1890, when Haines' great-great grandfather and Civil War veteran Martin L. Haines bought about 50 acres in the Pine Barrens, just outside of Wharton State Forest.

It gradually grew to its size today, with 1,400 acres of cranberry-producing bogs, as the Haines family bought neighboring land from growers who decided to get out of the business, PICC Assistant Manager Michael Haines said.

The operation was passed down to the Haines' great grandfather Ralph, grandfather Bill Sr., father Bill Jr. and finally to sister and brother Stefanie and Michael.

When the operation started, workers dry-picked the cranberries using scoops, wooden baskets with comblike wooden teeth that pulled the berries off the vines, a long and tedious process, Michael Haines said. Now, they've switched to wet-harvesting, a process that uses a reservoir and a system of wells, pumps and gates to flood the sandy bogs to about 18 inches of water, which is why it's so important to have a 10-to-1 ratio of protective land acreage.

"Maybe 40 or 50 years ago, we started doing wet-harvest, which is flooding the bogs ... and having a crew of about eight or nine guys pushing machines that knock the berries off the vines," Michael Haines said. "Since cranberries float, you can gather them into a corner and get them out."



State cranberry production forecast to drop 9 percent

The harvesting process is evolving away from the hand-pushed reel harvesters to Gates Harrow machines, Haines said. It is a tractor that has harrows on the bottom and gently knocks the fruit off the vines, as opposed to the egg-beating style of the reel harvesters. The Gates Harrow does less harm to the vines and is a much quicker process.

Harvested cranberries float because they have four hollow chambers. The hollow chambers also allow them to bounce. Berries that bounce are good ones, Stefanie Haines said.

Once at the surface Tuesday, the bright-red cranberries were corralled into a corner of the bog using a boom, a type of hose that floats and hangs down about 6 inches into the water to make sure all berries are in the section. Workers pushed the cranberries into a bog-side cleaner, which washed and separated the berries from any debris. The cleaner shot the berries into a grain truck, which held about 400 barrels, or 40,000 pounds, of the fruit. The truck took the berries to the Ocean Spray Cooperative receiving station, about 5 miles up Route 563 in Chatsworth.

Pine Island Cranberry Co. is an owner-grower with the Ocean Spray co-op, Stefanie Haines said. If a cranberry company grows for Ocean Spray, they are also part owner.

Last year, PICC produced 32.6 million pounds of fruit, which averages to about 255 barrels per acre. It was one of their best years, Stefanie Haines said.

Even though it's only midway through this harvesting season, the sister-brother duo are optimistic about this year.

"We're always shooting for higher," Stefanie said. "It's going smoothly. We're going through the acreage. Some bogs have pretty good yields we're happy with, others were below average."

Part of that may be due to October's recent warm weather. Cranberries are a cold-weather fruit that need the day's warmth to grow bigger and the night's cold to become a brighter red, Stefanie said.

"They're pretty tough, but you need that balance of cold and heat," she said.

The cranberries need the cold nights to achieve that bright red for which Ocean Spray strives. As the nights become colder, a representative said they expect to be very busy, averaging about 50 trucks a day.

In the meantime, the family company will continue to do what it does best — harvest day in and day out until the season ends the first week of November.

“It’s special to have a family business, something that has been here for 127 years, something that’s provided for the family and the people that have worked here and provided a living for them. Growing food is just something that you feel like you’re doing a good and worthwhile thing,” Michael Haines said. “It’s just enjoyable, anyway, to be in this beautiful area every day.”

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At least ‘Garden State’ slogan is good for South Jersey



'Garden State' not official state slogan, soon may be