

# AGRIVIEW

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## Maple Season Gets Running Early

By Mark Bosma

The steam from the sugarhouse at Branon Family Maple Orchards could be seen from nearly a half mile away. Impressive, considering the fog, and the fact that it was February 8th.

Maple season got a head start at the Fairfield sugarhouse this year.

"It's the earliest we've ever started," Tom Branon said as he and his brother Tim, and their friend George Robtoy kept a watchful eye on the evaporator.

An unseasonably warm stretch that began a few days earlier brought about this jump on the season. The conditions allowed the Branons to gather about 23,000 gallons of sap.

"It's a limited season, so we decided to take advantage and get an early start," Branon said.

Their timing couldn't have been better, the family decided to tap early this year and had just finished that job when the warm weather hit. That decision resulted in some 500 gallons of syrup that was produced that first

couple of days.

"It looks like the Branons hit it perfectly!" Vermont Agency of Agriculture maple marketing specialist Bruce Martel says. Neither Martel nor anyone at the agency can remember an earlier start to the maple season.

An early start like this does come with some risks, which may explain why more producers statewide weren't making syrup during this unseasonably warm stretch.

"Drilling frozen wood can split the bark and it would leak sap," Agency of Agriculture maple specialist Henry Marckres said. "That's more so in a normal year, 50-degrees wasn't exactly normal."

Marckres also says there is a risk taps could dry out in the absence of regular runs. The Branons incorporate a vacuum system and a pipeline, so that was less of a concern.

"Those who start early produce a greater quantity of lighter syrups, like fancy," Martel says. "There are others who chose to extend the season by

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Steam rises up from the sugarhouse at Branon Family Maple Orchards in Fairfield on February 8th. It was the earliest anyone could remember the family starting maple production for the year.

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## Maple Season

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going later into the season, they usually make more darker syrups."

It's too early to tell if this early start will foreshadow a successful 2005 maple season, which is largely determined by the weather, but Marckres says there are indications this season could be a productive one.

"You never know until it's done with," he says, "but with the moisture in the ground and it's not frozen tremendously deep, with the right weather, there should be some decent runs."

There could also be good news for prices. Very little inventory has been carried over from last year, and with a strong demand for Vermont syrup that

currently exists, producers could see greater profits this year.

Vermont leads the nation in maple production. In 2004, Vermonters produced about 30% of all the maple syrup made in the United States, about 500,000 gallons. Cash receipts from those

sales totaled \$12-15 million. That production represented a 19% increase from 2003.

Vermont also had the longest maple season in the nation in 2004, 89 days. If current weather patterns hold, that's an honor that could be repeated in 2005.



## Comments Sought on EQIP

The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service will host a public "listening" session on the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) on March 16.

The session will be held from 10:00 a.m. to noon at the Berlin Agricultural Service Center,

Extension conference room.

EQIP is the largest program available to farmers and ranchers for soil and water conservation on working lands, said Francis Keeler, NRCS state conservationist. "This is the basic program for landowners to obtain funds for actions like improving water quality and developing animal manure management systems," he said.

EQIP became law in 1997 and was renewed in the 2002 Farm Bill. In Vermont, the program has grown from \$600,000 for conservation to nearly \$5 million in 2005. Since 1997, nearly 162,000 acres in the state have been entered into the program. "We want to know if the national priorities are still on target or if people think they should be modified. We hope people will attend and tell us their ideas," Keeler said.

Nationally the natural resource concerns are:

- Reduce emissions that contribute to air quality impairment
- Reduce soil erosion and sediment from unacceptable high rates on highly erodible land; and
- Promote the recovery of at-risk wildlife habitat species.

Each person who registers at the meeting will have five minutes to make their comments. "If time permits after the EQIP discussion, we will take comments on any of the 2002 Farm Bill programs," said Keeler.

The meeting is open to the general public.

NOTE: The meeting facility is accessible to people with disabilities. NRCS will provide upon request, reasonable auxiliary aids and services necessary for individuals with disabilities to have an equal opportunity to participate. If a signing interpreter or other auxiliary aid or service is needed, contact Anne Hilliard, NRCS Public Affairs Specialist at 802 951 6795, x234 or e-mail [anne.hilliard@vt.nrcs.usda.gov](mailto:anne.hilliard@vt.nrcs.usda.gov).

- Reduce non-point source pollutants; reduce groundwater contamination and conservation of ground and surface water resources;

## FDA Recordkeeping Regulations Finalized

By Brian Norder, Vermont Food Venture Center

Concerns about the vulnerability America's food supply to terrorist attack prompted Congress to include provisions in the Bioterrorism Act of 2002 (BTA) to help protect the food supply. Of the four major new regulations, the most complex one, covering product recordkeeping and traceability was finalized in December of 2004.

The other regulations cover registration of food facilities, prior notice of food imports and detention of foods deemed hazardous. The recordkeeping and registration regulations are the ones that will have the greatest affect on Vermont's food industry and will be reviewed here.

Effective December 12, 2004, operators or agents of "facilities that manufacture/process, pack or hold food for human or animal consumption within the United States are required to register the facility with the FDA." The recordkeeping regulations also include food transporters and distributors and some retailers.

Registration is intended to inform the FDA of who is engaged in the activities that may be subject to tampering while the recordkeeping and traceability regulations are designed to identify and track foods as they move through the food chain so they can be isolated and recalled in the event they are tampered with or found to be unsafe. Each person or company in the chain of processing trucking and distribution is expected to identify the "Immediate Previous Source" or IPS and the "Immediate Subsequent Recipient" or ISR.

For food transporters or shippers the IPS and the ISR can be another carrier. All other companies: processors, warehouse facilities and distributors, must be able to track not only to the shipper but the source or recipient immediately prior to or after the shipper. Retailers are subject to some provisions of the regulation, based upon size and customer base.

For shippers, distributors and retailers, compliance should be relatively easy. Bills of lading or air waybills that meet current regulatory standards will meet most of the shipping guidelines while invoicing systems provide a good start for compliance by distributors and retailers. For entities engaged in processing, things are much more complicated.

Processors must be able to correlate the lot or batch numbers of their finished goods to the lot numbers of raw ingredients. For example, a farmstead cheesemaker who sells to a distributor or a retailer will need to identify the lot numbers of rennet, salt and starter culture in each batch of cheese made and identify which store or distributor purchased that specific lot of cheese.

While farms are exempted from both registration and recordkeeping regulations, the exemptions are so narrow that many farm-based enterprises will need to comply. Sugarmakers are generally not exempt unless all sales are direct to the consumer.

The effective dates for recordkeeping compliance vary according to the size of the company. Most Vermont food producers and farms fall into the "very small" category with a December 2006 deadline to have systems in place.

Help is available for farm-based business to comply with these regulations. The Vermont Food Venture Center has received a grant from the John Merck Fund to develop user-friendly record keeping systems and help farmers and growers understand and comply with these regulations. For information, contact Brian Norder at 802-849-2000 or [bnorder@sover.net](mailto:bnorder@sover.net).

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