

Strawberry/Conservation Field Days

The photo to right was taken on March 27 at Dail Farms in Edgecombe County, NC, during the second of three Strawberry/Conservation Field Days recently held. About 35 people attended, including both growers and a large number of personnel from the district offices of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). NRCS is now offering several EQIP practices that can provide financial incentives for strawberry growers to use row covers, methyl bromide replacements, and VIF plastic. For many NRCS staff, this was an opportunity to learn the basics of the strawberry cropping system – they mostly work with row crops and livestock producers.

Strawberry Extension Specialists Barclay Poling and Hannah Burrack came to the Field Day to share their observations and recommendations, and Hannah passed around leaves and hand lenses so participants could see aphids and mites. Dail Farm is one of the sites comparing alternative fumigants as part of NCSU's Methyl Bromide Alternatives Project – Rob Welker described the trials there (methyl bromide, Telone C-35, and Midas). There was no visible difference at this time between the treatments, but Rob was taking plant samples today, and Scott will collect data on yields at harvest. In a short row with no fumigation at all, plants were visibly smaller and weedier.

The first field day was held March 25 at Buckwheat Farm in Apex, NC, the farm of Karma and Jim Lee. Here, discussion centered on the conservation challenges faced by many strawberry farms. For example, it is difficult for many producers, like Karma, to practice crop rotations, because the farm doesn't have enough land, or market considerations require that land easily visible and accessible from the road be used. Plastic-covered beds increase erosion, but it can be hard to lay any kind of contour beds or change their orientation.

This farm is one of three farms par-



Scott Dail, in the white shirt, explains his use of row covers and irrigation at the Conservation/Strawberry Field Day on his farm. The field day brought together growers and conservationists to learn about each others' programs and practices.

ticipating in a project researching the use of summer cover crops in strawberries. Researchers Michelle Schroeder-Moreno and Gina Fernandez and graduate student Ben Garland were on hand to discuss the project; expect to learn more in a future newsletter. Plant pathologist Mahfuzur Rahman looked closely at Karma's fields for signs of disease (and found none). Only one farm seems to have a serious problem with anthracnose crown rot this year, he said.

The final Field Day is on April 1, as this newsletter goes to press, at Joan and Kenneth Rudd's farm in Greensboro, NC. All three of these farms are applying for the new NRCS strawberry EQIP programs and have agreed to serve as hosts for field events such as these. A second round of field days will be held this summer and will focus on especially on fumigation issues.

The EQIP strawberry conservation programs are not direct grant programs;

Strawberry Field Days will be held on April 9 (in Sanford) and May 5 (in Salisbury). See page 11 for more info!

growers must apply to NRCS and develop a conservation plan. Applications are then ranked based on various factors, competing for a limited pool of available funds. The process takes a while, but can be started at any time. There are many other non-strawberry-specific conservation programs that growers may be interested in and qualify for on their farms. Conservationists also offer conservation planning advice and technical assistance. Growers interested in participating in the NRCS programs should start by contacting their local NRCS office. (Note that while these strawberry programs are NC only, NRCS is a federal office, and in all states.) Visit www.nrcs.usda.gov/ and click on "Find a Service Center Near You".

This project to increase the participation of specialty crop producers in conservation programs is a project of the Center for Agricultural Partnerships (www.agcenter.org). The project is also developing fact sheets for growers and NRCS personnel, a conservation planning workbook, and resources to help growers choose and change to MB alternatives. ❖