

# Project 22-50 Update

## Processing & Selling 1,000,000 Pounds at a Time

June 2023

At the 2023 Comprehensive Elderberry Workshop hosted annually by Terry Durham's River Hills Elderberry Producers and the University of Missouri Extension, Chris Patton updated MEC's progress towards its goal of 2,250 (twenty-two fifty) profitable, producing acres of elderberry. Currently, the key farmers in the elderberry world estimate that there are between two and three thousand commercial acres of American elderberry (*Sambucus nigra canadensis*) grown in the United States. MEC members only account for a modest portion of that, but as an open cooperative, we work with dozens more farmers than are members. Even so, our goals are realistically adjusted.

**MEC's goal of 2,250 acres is 10% of our nation's economic potential for 22,500 acres of American elderberry.** Those acres will be made up of both small grower members selling directly to their customers as well as by commercial scale members who have equity in the coop through distribution rights ownership. (See Membership.) In a good year 2,250 acres of farmed American elderberry will yield 10,000,000 pounds of frozen berries. (MEC standard is to freeze the day of harvest to maximize nutrient content and freshness.)

## The European Import Challenge

**Europe has over 30,000 acres in cultivation, much of that for flowers alone.** Most European elderberry ingredients exported to the United States are from wild collected elderberries (*Sambucus nigra*), which is classified as certified organic. European research comparing farm-grown to wild-harvested documented that **wild harvested contained only about 50% of the nutrients per kilo.** Consequently, the European harvest is often processed into concentrates and extracts, heated and refined until desired nutrient specifications are met. That is also why concentrates and extracts make up most of the ingredients imported by US companies. Most US product labels have certified organic elderberry (*Sambucus nigra*) or elderberry juice (from concentrate), which indicate foreign origin, most likely European.

## The American Answer

MEC currently brokers bulk frozen berries, juice, dried berries and flowers as well as freeze dried berries through its website and customer lists. We do our best to match growers and buyers regionally in order to minimize transport costs. We just refer buyers to a local grower for their direct sales when appropriate. Some of our best customers are members who have successful value added products of their own but do not

produce enough elderberries or flowers to meet customer demand. MEC strongly supports local sourcing of food and connecting farmers with customer neighbors.

To compete with Europe's established infrastructure going back hundreds of years, MEC has applied for and received some grants from the Minnesota Department of Agriculture and USDA SARE to fund feasibility studies, business plan and grower development. A new grant for \$48,800 is dedicated to the purchase and trial of a continuous flow elder berry destemmer being developed in Minnesota. We are pursuing additional grant and funding options towards completing our first regional hub - probably in Wright County, MN. It will provide a template for developing additional hubs in other parts of the country.

This first regional hub will have a modest office and store frozen picked & packed berries along with one, optionally mobile, processing line from destemming picked berries to sanitized Individually Quick Frozen (IQF) berries packed in totes compatible with most food processing equipment. IQF berries are much easier to work with than our present practice of bulk frozen in 4 gallon food grade pails. We plan to make this line available for other small fruit growers to turn their harvested crops into IQF ingredients.

Concurrently, MEC is in the middle of early stage ingredient development projects with co-packers, food processors and aronia farmers in the development of aronia-elderberry juice powders and shelf stable juice. MEC will test the market with both pure American Elderberry and the elderberry-aronia mixed ingredient products. our market test combined with process analysis seeks to maximize harvest price to growers, production expenses, distribution costs, and MEC overhead.

At this stage in the development of American Elderberry as a successful and enduring **commercial crop**, MEC's strategic priorities are in order of importance: meeting customer ingredient format & quality specifications, market share, cash flow, and profit. This approach is designed with the goal of generating dependable profits for commercial scale growers even as it delivers high quality, dependable ingredient supply to buyers.