The Cranberry Scare of 1959, Black Monday

By Michael Bartling

Arthur Flemming was the US Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare from 1958-1961. He created a significant and controversial event for a young cranberry industry when on November 9, 1959 he announced 17 days before Thanksgiving that some of the 1959 cranberry crop contained traces of a weed killer named Aminotriazole, which had shown to cause thyroid cancer in lab rats. While cranberry sales were not banned, Flemming cautioned consumers "to be on the safe side" if they did not know where the cranberries came from.

Following decreased sales during that holiday season, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) determined that 99 percent of the crop was not contaminated in January, 1960. Cranberry farmers did stop using Aminotriazole as an herbicide when Ocean Spray, their largest consumer, demanded it. Up to this point, cranberries were mostly consumed during Thanksgiving and Christmas. While cranberry juice was available, it wasn't popular until Ocean Spray started to promote the juice after the 1959 holidays. Cranberry production would go on to increase over time.

BOOM! BLACK MONDAY! This was a bombshell, beginning a very dark time that took the cranberry industry to its knees for many years and was thereafter referred to as "Black Monday" by the press and particularly cranberry farmers. I was born one year before this happened. My parents were Fred and Lenore Bartling, and my brother Peter and I later became the third generation to run our family farm on Little Trout Lake in southwest Manitowish Waters. I will relate stories I learned from relatives, neighbors, news articles, letters and other industry representatives over time, and links to MWHS archives to these documents are provided herein.

To set the stage, in 1959, the farms in Manitowish Waters were still very young (started in 1946) and so not yet very large or productive. The world cranberry crop was grown solely in the United States in MA, NJ, OR, WA and WI, predominantly in MA and NJ. Nearly the entire crop was grown for seasonal fresh fruit to be sold to and processed by homeowners for the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays. There was very little commercially processed cranberry juice or sauce sold at the time.

Ocean Spray Cranberries, Inc. (OSC) was and is a farmer-owned cooperative that started in 1930 based, at that time, in Hanson, MA, marketing fresh cranberries that had been harvested and packed for sale across the country by their member farmer/owners. OSC was actively growing the company and was enlisting new growers. Most of the MW growers had joined Ocean Spray for marketing their crops only a few years prior, and they had previously marketed their fruit through smaller WI-based cranberry handler companies.

The national cranberry crop in 1959 was about 100,000 barrels (100 pounds/barrel). Today, it is about 10 million barrels. In 1959, the cranberry industry was in an oversupply situation and had been for the prior few years, and crop revenues were low (for further details, you can click the following to read

“Dedication Address by Dr. George Peltier, August 8, 1959,” a brief history on WI cranberry here.) (hyperlink from Search Results for 2024.012.004 | Manitowish Waters Historical Society (pastperfectonline.com)

With the claims from Secretary Flemming, cranberries did not sell in 1959, crops were dumped as waste, and crop revenues were zero. When I was young, I remember piles of cranberries that had been dumped in the woods around our farm that lasted for many years. The farms in MW were fledgling in 1959, and many farms around the country did not survive. I don’t know how ours did, as it was our family’s only source of revenue as was true of the other area growers.

Another local farmer Betty Koller recalled the following during a 2015 MWHS interview: “Aminotriazole. The Dept. of Agriculture declared it caused cancer. This was right before Thanksgiving. All the grocers took their cranberries off the shelves. My father was on a committee to help with this. They were supposed to

meet with (Senator) Proxmire, but he went out the back door, and they never did meet with him. They did what they could, but it took years before we could put this behind us. We had a warehouse full of berries that froze and thawed, and we could do nothing with them. We had to dump them when they told us we could dump them, and they proved that there was no reason to do that. That they weren't harming anything. In fact, we heard potato and celery growers could use this, but cranberries couldn't. That didn't indemnify us, but it didn't recover what we lost and get some money."

Most companies in this situation would cut costs and not spend money they didn't have, but interestingly, the OSC growers doubled down and supported their cooperative's investment into growing their processed fruit business and diversify to hedge against this happening again. This investment further depressed already slim grower returns for years to come. OSC invested heavily in manufacturing, research and development, marketing and advertising its cranberry juice drink product, "Cranberry Juice Cocktail" and cranberry sauce. A couple years later, OSC developed the first line extension juice blend of "Cranapple Juice Cocktail." The berries that were the byproduct of the fresh fruit business were the key ingredient for these products. It took years of investment and advertising for consumers to develop a taste for these products, but they did, and they remain very popular today along with many others developed over time.

In the meantime, the federal government realized they had made a serious mistake with their press release. Aminotriazole was initially thought to contain the first potential carcinogen to be identified that may cause thyroid cancer in lab mice at extremely high doses. It was later determined that this was not true, and the herbicide was then registered for use on cranberries and other crops, although OSC prohibited its use by its growers. In 1959, the herbicide had been used in WA on small experimental trial plots, and the crops were destroyed and were never in the marketplace. The same herbicide was being applied to many other crops with no similar issues or reports of health safety.

The damage was done, but in fact, cranberries are a very healthy fruit that're naturally low in sugar. The government issued retractions, and some restitution was eventually paid to growers from the government. Press conferences were held showing legislators drinking cranberry juice with cranberry farmers as can be seen here. (hyperlink from The Yankee 1980 cranberry article.pdf (ppolinks.com)). The USDA began cranberry purchase programs for military personnel and school lunches, and feeding programs for the needy, among others. These sales helped but the issue should have been prevented. Secretary Flemming did not follow proper protocols before issuing his statement.

George Olsson, then president of OSC, issued a statement to all cranberry growers laying out the serious problems they faced and asked growers for their help by writing to President Eisenhower, Vice President Nixon, and their Congressmen and Senators, which can be seen here. (hyperlink from OSC Pres letter to growers 1959.pdf (ppolinks.com). Olsson asked growers to tell their story and supplied draft language for them to consider using in doing so. In addition, he supplied the names and addresses of their respective representatives. Bert Leasure (Betty Koller's father) was vice chairman of the OSC Board of Directors in 1959, and he wrote letters to WI Congressman Alvin E. O'Konski and US Senator William Proxmire. Copies and responses are provided here. (hyperlink from Okonski letters combined.pdf (ppolinks.com); B Leasure W Proxmire 1960 letters.pdf (ppolinks.com). Trade organizations and media outlets like National

Council of Farmer Cooperatives, Chemical Week, The Packer, Food Field Reporter, and Farm Journal published articles, which can be found here, (hyperlink to Search Results for 2024.012.002 | Manitowish Waters Historical Society (pastperfectonline.com)) and that worked to help the cranberry industry by educating their constituents and readers.

Secretary of Agriculture (USDA) Ezra Taft Benson was incensed by Secretary Flemming's surprise announcement as evidenced here. (hyperlink from The Yankee 1980 cranberry article.pdf (ppolinks.com); Search Results for 2024.012.005 | Manitowish Waters Historical Society (pastperfectonline.com)). The USDA had spent five years researching and approving Aminotriazole as safe for use on crops and human consumption of those crops. Secretary Benson vowed he would consume cranberries during Thanksgiving in 1959 (see here), (hyperlink from "The Thanksgiving Without Cranberries -The Yankee 1980 cranberry article.pdf (ppolinks.com)) and the OSC Directors drank a toast of cranberry juice in MA in thanks.

The cranberry industry learned a very difficult lesson from all of this and became, and remains, an agriculture leader in perpetually promoting food safety in our products and farm practices. OSC is extremely fastidious with food safety of finished products. It tracks and tests cranberries and products from the farm field through manufacturing to the store shelf to ensure safe products.

The federal government, through various agencies such as the EPA and FDA, creates and maintains laws in concert with the cranberry industry and chemical manufacturing companies that become the pesticide label. It takes 8-10 years of research on environmental fate, human and animal safety, and efficacy for a new product to be registered for use on any crop. The label is the law. At the farm level for cranberry crop nutrient and pest management practices, cranberry farmers became and remain agricultural pioneers in best practices.

In the early 1980s when I was fresh out of Horticulture School at The University of Wisconsin at Madison, I began writing and executing Integrated Pest Management Plans and Nutrient Management Plans for our farm. We had been doing this in practice for years, but in a less deliberate process. We work very closely with the UW Extension and industry researchers in WI and around the world. We collaborate with the Wisconsin State Cranberry Growers Association and the Cranberry Institute, a world trade organization for cranberries that works with chemical manufacturers and regulators, among other pursuits, like managing cranberry health benefits research. I eventually served on the board of directors of both of these trade organizations and OSC.

The pest management plans direct weed, insect and disease controls to only be used when economic thresholds are met and to use the safest products available for the environment. The thresholds are determined by intensive crop monitoring for these pests. Intensive scouting has allowed us to avoid some insecticide and fungicide applications. Sometimes flooding the cranberry beds in the early part of the growing season controls insects so that chemical controls are avoided. We map problem weeds and use herbicides only in these areas and not the whole farm. We hand-pull certain persistent woody weeds. The list goes on.

Our nutrient management plans are geared to the reduction of fertilizer inputs by using the proper composition of nutrients that the crop will utilize and avoid those it won't, and to apply only what is needed for crop development and apply them at optimum timing when the plants are actively using them. We take cranberry plant tissue and soil samples and adjust fertilizer inputs to maintain optimum levels. We base these decisions on each season's crop development that is monitored with special instruments. We either build or have special equipment for our farms that very accurately apply crop inputs to only the targeted areas.

We have also developed and executed Wildlife Management and Water Management plans, and have planted and maintained extensive native pollinator gardens.

Our farm and the others in MW utilize lake water for irrigation, and it is vitally important to us to maintain high quality source water for generations to come. We are stewards of our land and water resources, and each generation is determined to leave as good or better quality of land and water for future generations. Our sons, Steven and David, are the fourth generation running our farm today and are actively perpetuating these plans and are industry leaders learning and teaching peers and future generations these best management practices.