During 2011, the Tree Fruit and Berry PWT sponsored a workshop on organic apple production (March 11 in Ballston Spa), an in-service tour of commercial orchards in Albany, Columbia, and Dutchess Counties (June 21), a tour of research plots at Cornell's Hudson Valley Lab in Highland (June 22), and three business meetings (22 March in Geneva, 22 June at the Hudson Valley Lab, and 29 November in Geneva). The Organic Apple Production Workshop is described at the end of this report and was partially funded via PWT special funds.

The in-service field tour organized by Mike Fargione provided participants with the opportunity to see diversified farm operations in the northern part of the Hudson Valley. The tour started with a visit to the apple winery and farm market at Goold Orchards in Castleton, and then included an on-farm research block at Yonder Farms in Hudson where Robinson and Hoying are evaluating new planting systems, productive young orchards of Honeycrisp apples at Fix Brothers near Hudson, an aronia planting at Mountain Range Farm, and finally the highly diversified Mead Orchards near Red Hook. The following morning, participants visited research plots at the Hudson Valley Lab and were shown, among other things, a new high-density planting of scab-resistant apples and the homemade sprayer that is being used to apply organic and conventional pesticide treatments that are being compared in this block. The in-service summer tour was valuable not only because it provided participants with insights into specific needs of agriculture in one geographic area of New York State, but also because it provided participants with opportunities for informal interactions with fruit growers, the private consultant (Russ Holze) who attended the tour, and with PWT members from other regions within the state.

In addition to the formalized PWT group functions, PWT extension educators organized numerous other winter fruit schools, summer tours, webinars, and field meetings where Cornell faculty presented the latest information on IPM practices and crop production strategies to stakeholder audiences. These fruit grower meetings frequently attract participants from other states and Canadian provinces because of the high quality of the programs. PWT members are also actively involved in regional professional meetings such as the Great Lakes Fruit Workers Conference that was held in Grand Rapids, MI in November, the New England, New York, and Canadian Fruit Workers Conference held in Burlington, VT in October, and the Cumberland-Shenandoah Fruit Workers Conference held in Winchester, VA. These professional meetings allow PWT participants to access the latest information generated by colleagues in other states while also show-casing our in-house expertise and research programs. More importantly, like the in-service summer tour, the informal networking that occurs at these professional meetings helps to build cooperative regional ventures among scientists and educators and helps to eliminate wasteful duplication of efforts.

All three of our PWT business meetings followed a similar format, with approximately half of the meeting time dedicated to informal sharing of observations concerning issues/problems observed or anticipated in tree fruit and berry crops during the current season. The other half of each meeting was used for updates on meeting plans, conferences that might be of interest to the group, and policy issues that might affect either PWT members or the clients that they serve in the tree fruit and berry industries. At the March meeting, the group decided that, given the large number of anticipated retirements among faculty involved in applied research and extension, our PWT should notify department chairs of our concerns that new faculty positions will need address the stakeholder
needs that have been covered by those who will be retiring. The PWT faculty co-chair subsequently sent letters addressing this concern to the chairs of the Departments of Horticulture, Entomology, and Plant Pathology and Plant-Microbe Biology.

Participation of private crop consultants at PWT meetings (2 to 3 consultants at each meeting) allowed the group to benefit from a broader range of observations than would have been feasible otherwise because consultants regularly interact with numerous growers and, taken together, have scouting programs that cover more than 70% of the total tree fruit and berry acreage in the state. At the same time, the consultants benefitted by having first-hand access to the latest information and developments discussed at PWT meetings. As budgets and programs within CALS are increasingly stressed, the importance of maintaining close ties with private consultants cannot be over-emphasized.

Report on Fruit PWT Special Needs Funding – FY 2011

The PWT special funds allocated to the Tree Fruit and Berry PWT in 2011 were used to defray costs of producing a notebook that was distributed to participants at the Cornell Organic Apple Production Workshop that was held in Ballston Spa on 11 March. The workshop attracted 54 participants with the following demographics: 9 females, 46 males, 50 whites, and 4 Asians. Participants reported growing 2,621 conventionally grown acres of apples and 49 acres of organic apples, but these numbers may underestimate the actual acreage represented because some participants opted not to provide information on their farms. The program organized by Mike Fargione included 10 formal presentations (mostly by Cornell scientists) and time for group discussion. Participants were provided with a notebook containing the presentation notes along with other information and publications relevant to organic apple production. Presenters highlighted both the possibilities and the difficulties inherent in producing organic apples under conditions in Northeastern United States where there is a high demand for organic fruit but where our climate favors fungal diseases and an abundance of wild apple trees act as reservoirs for insect pests that can attack fruit. One session featured several growers who are producing organic apples. The insights shared by these experienced growers provided a valuable addition to the technical information presented by Cornell scientists and extension educators.

Although the audience for this program was relatively small, the program addressed the needs of a significant niche-market group of fruit growers in New York State, and it allowed educators and private crop consultants to update their knowledge about the current status of organic apple production. A surprising number of conventional apple growers in eastern New York, especially those involved in direct marketing, had expressed interest in learning more about organic apple production because their customers frequently ask if they can produce organic apples.

The 23 apple growers who completed the evaluation form at the end of the program reported that the workshop was useful to them. Five of the participants reported that they would increase their organic acreage as a result of the program whereas the remainder indicated that they would not change their current allocation of acreage between organic and conventional production. Organic growers also indicated that they would change some of their production practices based on new information presented at this meeting.