How many acres does a crop consultant need to support a full-time business? One Extension fruit specialist estimated that to be successful, a consultant needs at least 2,000 acres. How many fruit growers would benefit from professional Integrated Pest Management (IPM) support? We would argue that virtually all have potential to improve yields and quality and reduce inputs costs with expert IPM advice.

In geographic regions where field crops dominate, or where small, diversified farms are the rule, the 2,000-acre threshold for specialty crops can be difficult to achieve within a reasonable travel distance. As we have learned, innovations that help consultants extend their geographic reach can contribute to a living wage and help smaller-scale growers thrive under IPM.

Apples in the Upper Midwest

Apples have been a commercial crop in the Upper Midwest since settlement times. Currently, there are many commercial orchards producing a high quality product with a need for IPM services, but only about 3,200 bearing acres in Wisconsin. Many of our smaller growers sell direct through pick-your-own, on-farm retail stores or at regional farmers’ markets. These strategies allow orchards of 20 acres or less to be profitable.

Neighboring Minnesota, Iowa, and Illinois have even fewer acres compared with a whopping 34,000 in Michigan. To add to the consulting challenge, our four-state region’s acres are scattered over a wide area. In Wisconsin, for example, travel time from the southwest corner of our state, where several orchards are located, to the Northwest corner, which also has a concentration of small orchards, is more than 300 miles! Despite the challenges, we have found a way to fully employ an IPM consultant, John Aue of Threshold IPM Services, to serve growers in multiple states.

Wisconsin’s eco-apple project

In 2000, the Wisconsin Apple Growers Association teamed up with the University of Wisconsin and Aue to develop a project that would help growers increase their use of IPM and reduce reliance on organophosphate and other pesticides targeted by the Food Quality Protection Act. Grower interest was strong, with nearly 40 orchards participating by 2006.

With funding from the USEPA, North Central IPM Center, and others, the project supported access to in-orchard tools such as weather monitors and monitoring traps and underwrote the cost of crop consulting, so that growers could learn how to use the tools in their orchards and interpret the data. The USDA-NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) IPM contracts with growers also supported grower purchase of IPM tools and consulting in some orchards.

This coaching was a key to IPM success. “Not being very good at identifying problems in the field, I needed someone with experience identifying pests and making recommendations for the IPM program,” reports Bill Stone, owner of Brightonwoods Orchard and one of the first participating growers.

Aue’s consulting was supplemented with Extension coaches in three counties, but before long, Aue was stretched beyond thin. He spent more time in the car than in client orchards, driving as much as six hours between visits during the growing season. Evenings and travel time were occupied with one-on-one grower calls following up on results of visits and performing triage with growers not on the visit schedule. Aue recalls, “It was difficult logistically to provide good service and balance...