

■ PARTNER CONTENT

# From frost fans to hayrides, wild weather is forcing CT farmers to adapt to a changing climate

 by Patrick Skahill | Connecticut Public  
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Jeff Sandness of Buell's Orchard in Eastford says the air movers pull down warmer air from above and blow it across the orchard. They are a help on unseasonably cold nights, though Sandness admits they sound like helicopters landing in the fields. TYLER RUSSELL / CONNECTICUT PUBLIC

Jeff Sandness' farm is filled with tools you'd expect — things like trucks and tractors. But nestled near rows of dormant apple trees and sweet cherries, there's something a bit more eye-catching: a massive propane-powered frost fan.

It's a curious sight, a windmill-like contraption, popping above a quiet winter farmscape in northeastern Connecticut. But as Sandness powers it up, the fan's purpose becomes clear: It moves warm air around.

“Seem a little strange standing under a helicopter?” Sandness jokes, as the fan spins above.

Around him, grass shakes and plants sway from the air. On cold spring nights, the device could be a lifesaver for his crops as it gently raises the ambient air temperature to protect his fruit from devastating spring frosts.

“It will keep rotating very slowly,” Sandness said as the fan noisily rattled and rotated overhead. “Takes about five minutes to go around the circle ... just creeping around really slow.”

Last year was a tough one for Connecticut farmers. From late-spring frosts to devastating summer floods, 2023 was the latest in a string of wild weather. And it's forcing farmers to rethink what they grow and how they do it.

On Sandness' farm in Eastford, subzero February temperatures wiped out his 2023 peach crop. Temperatures then warmed up, but in May, a freak frost stuck around for a few extra hours overnight, damaging his crop of delicate young apples.

“Spring can't come earlier and then go away,” Sandness said. “That becomes the issue that we're facing as far as getting through the spring and freezing weather.”

## 'There's no time to breathe'



Jeff Sandness points to inconsistent weather of the past several years as a source of significant trouble at his family fruit farm, Buell's Orchard. (Tyler Russell/Connecticut Public) TYLER RUSSELL / CONNECTICUT PUBLIC

Even a few degrees of temperature variation is a big deal for fruit farmers in the Northeast, said Evan Lentz, an assistant extension educator at UConn.

"That can really mean the difference between life and death for some of these fruit crops," he said.

On a cold blustery day, Lentz walked among rows of dormant mcintosh apples and sweet cherries on Sandness' farm. Lentz, who consults with farmers across the state, said the recent wild weather was on lots of their minds.

"The major consideration is like, where do you put your time and your money, especially when your crop is already so compromised," he said.

As the growing season progressed, Lentz said some farmers would spray to protect their crops from pests, only to see torrential summer rains wash away all that work.

“And then you have to consider, is it worth going out again, spending more money, just to get the spray on, so it’s actually effective? Or do I just let it go?” Lentz said.

Farmers are asking these questions more and more, said Bryan Hurlburt, head of the Connecticut Department of Agriculture.

“The challenge that the weather and the climate has posed over the past couple of years is there’s no break,” he said. “There’s no time to breathe and say, ‘What are we going to do next? How do we pivot from here?’”

Since Hurlburt took over the agency in March 2019, the state has requested five federal disaster declarations after weather wiped out crops.

### Extreme weather ‘pretty scary’ for farmers



Water covers the road leading to Rocky Hill farmer Francis Whalen’s fields after heavy rains during last year’s harvest brought the Connecticut River’s water line up to unseasonable highs. (Tyler Russell/Connecticut Public)

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Drought and severe rain are driving most of those requests, said Julie Fine, New England’s climate and agriculture specialist for American Farmland Trust. Farmers are getting overwhelmed by the ping-pong between these climate extremes, she said.

“People feel like they’re having to prepare for two extremes instead of one extreme. And that’s pretty scary for a lot of people,” Fine said.

Across the region, farmers are adapting their fields, installing irrigation or drainage as needed and some are putting up buildings to protect their crops.

“Installing a lot of high tunnels and greenhouses just trying to get a little more control over the environment,” Fine said.

Farmers are also changing their sales tactics to adapt, Hurlburt said.

“They try to do different things across multiple seasons, so that they’re not necessarily relying on one good time of year for all their sales,” Hurlburt said.

In the Northeast, that means agritourism and direct-to-consumer sales. Think pick-your-own apples or popping the kids on a hayride to go grab pumpkins.

Pick-your-own strawberries has been great for bringing in customers, Sandness said.

In addition to the frost fans, he’s considering other changes to adapt to the weather, like installing more irrigation. That’s because for farmers like Sandness, climate threats are always changing.

“We had a wet, wet, wet year. A dry, dry, dry year. And another wet, wet, wet one,” he said. “So what’s 2024 gonna be?”



To hedge their bets and stretch their season Buell's Orchard is home to a number of products including apples, peaches and pumpkins brought in just for picking activities. Sandness says their next crop experiment is with sweet cherries. (Tyler Russell/Connecticut Public) TYLER RUSSELL / CONNECTICUT PUBLIC

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