

Conservation *Showcase*

Integrated pest management works *if you do it right*, orchardist says

Miguel Contreras likes calling the shots. He likes making the management decisions that go into producing a beautiful crop of Washington apples. But most of all, he likes seeing the “fruits of his labor” in the bin—ready to go to market.

But he hasn’t always been calling the shots. Just a few years ago, he wasn’t the boss.

His journey into agriculture began in 1982 when Contreras stopped by an apple orchard just north of Zillah, Washington. “I was just looking for work,” he says. “And the owner hired me.”

Though he knew little about farming or the orchard business, Contreras was willing to learn and work as hard as he possibly could. “I assume he liked my work,” he says referring to his former boss, “because I worked for him for a long, long time.”

Contreras says his attitude was to learn as much as he could from the owner—and he did. “It’s about attitude and fortitude to get things done that allows people to get ahead,” he says. “If you want to get things done and people see that you work hard, they’ll help you along—push you a little bit.”

Contreras now owns that 56-acre orchard where he made that fateful inquiry some 30 years ago.

“In 2004 the owner said ‘I hate to sell this place to just anyone. I see that you know what you’re doing. You know everything that it takes to grow apples. And you do a good job for me so I think you’d make a good orchardist, a good farmer.’”

“In the end, the owner made me, as they say, ‘an offer I couldn’t refuse,’” Contreras says.

“It’s just good all the way around, the way we’re doing it now. If you can avoid the powerful insecticides, that’s just good for us, for my crops and for the environment.” —Miguel Contreras

During the peak of harvest, Contreras employs 16 workers. As the owner of his own business, and with the livelihoods of so many people (including his own) resting upon the wisdom of his decisions, he feels the weight of that responsibility. “If you mess up, there’s no one to blame but yourself,” he says.



Miguel Contreras is the owner of a 56-acre orchard just north of Zillah, Washington.

Conservation *Showcase* (continued)



Pheromone strips are strategically placed throughout Contreras' orchard as an alternative to organophosphate pesticides (OPs).

So when he decided to look for new ways to reduce his use of organophosphate pesticides (known as OPs) while also keeping his crops safe from pests that could decimate his harvest, he turned to the help of USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Through its Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), NRCS provides both technical and financial assistance to growers who want to implement Integrated Pest Management (IPM) systems—which often include providing pest controls that reduce or eliminate the need for OPs.

While organophosphate pesticides pose no dietary risks to humans, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is concerned with their risks to the environment and to workers, especially during post application tasks such as thinning.

NRCS Civil Engineering Technician Martin Rodriguez, who is working with Contreras in implementing his EQIP plan, says that some of the harsher OPs are being phased out by 2012. "Providing a viable pest management alternative – especially for controlling the destructive

codling moth—is becoming more and more important," he says.

"Mr. Contreras' contract was one of the first approved for the IPM pilot project of converting to a new methodology for controlling pests in orchards," says NRCS' Rodriguez. "There were a lot of unknowns at the time."

But, Rodriguez says, Contreras was flexible and willing to see the plan through.

The positive results of implementing his IPM—which include the use of insect traps and pheromone strips—are already evident to Contreras. "The fruit is beautiful and it saves us money because we don't have to spray as much," he says.

However, Contreras admits that in the beginning he wasn't sure the process would work as advertised.

"At first I wasn't really sold on it," Contreras says, "But, man, it works – *if* you do it right."

NRCS' Rodriguez says that the pheromones in the strips that Contreras uses in his orchard mimic the pheromones produced by insects to attract the opposite sex. "Distributing the pheromone strips throughout an area masks the insect's own attractant and prevents the sexes from getting together," he says. "So placing the proper number of strips and traps is critical."

By monitoring insect traps often and by spotting pests early, growers can often eliminate the need for harsh pesticides—especially the broad spectrum type that kill beneficial predator and pollinator species as well.

"When I worked for my former boss, we tried the pheromone strips, but we didn't do it right," Contreras says. "We only applied the strips at half the recommended rate. We learned that you can't do that. Either you do it the way you're supposed to, or you just don't bother."

Now the boss, Contreras insists on doing it right way.

"It's just good all the way around, the way we're doing it now," Contreras says. "If you can avoid the powerful insecticides, that's just good for us, for my crops and for the environment," he says.

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Written and photographed by Ron Nichols, Public Affairs Officer, NRCS, WA



Miguel Contreras (left) and NRCS Civil Engineering Technician Martin Rodriguez review Contreras' Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) plan.