



# Ashland County

## High Tunnels Take Hold in Northern Wisconsin

### Background

High tunnels are simple greenhouse structures typically unheated and used primarily to improve the quality and quantity of summer vegetable production while extending the growing season in the spring and fall. Plants grown in high tunnels are grown directly in the ground or in raised beds as opposed to in pots or on benches as is common in traditional greenhouses. High tunnels are a great resource for beginning farmers, in particular, as the structures are relatively low-cost and easy to install. In Ashland and Bayfield counties, the season is very short and soils are slow to warm-up. High tunnels are an essential part of commercial vegetable production in those counties. In recent years, the USDA-NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) has been providing cost-share assistance for farmers to install high tunnels as a means to reduce pesticide use in vegetable production.

### High Tunnel Production Capacity

In researching survey reports and NRCS records, there are 56 high tunnels in Ashland, Bayfield, and Douglas Counties. These high tunnels range in size from 20 ft. by 14 ft. to 146 ft. by 30 ft. Twenty-five of the 56 high tunnels were installed with cost-sharing assistance through NRCS. Combined, there are 1.9 acres of land under high tunnels in the Chequamegon Bay area. An additional 10 high tunnels were cost-shared in the 2015 round of EQIP funding and will be installed in 2016. Given the high productivity of high tunnels, this acreage represents significant production capacity. For example, if all of the high tunnels were used for commercial tomato production in the same year and the tunnels averaged 2.1 lbs of tomatoes per square foot, the tunnels could produce roughly 174,000 lbs/yr of tomatoes. Based on USDA per capita fresh tomato consumption of 12.6 lbs/yr and a total population of Ashland and Bayfield Counties of 30,800, the tunnels could supply roughly 45% of total annual fresh tomato consumption. In practice, not all high tunnels will be used to grow just tomatoes every year, but the calculations illustrate the significance of the growing capacity in the current high tunnels. That said, even using all the high tunnels in the region cannot fully supply even a single product for the Ashland and Bayfield market.

High tunnels in the region are used for a mix of commercial vegetable production and as means to grow food for the family. Respondents reported using high tunnels to grow over



**High tunnels are used to significantly increase production of summer crops, such as tomatoes, and to extend the season in the spring and fall.**

60 different types of vegetables. In terms of production practices, 70% of respondents reported being organic but not certified, 13% reported being certified organic, 9% reported using organic pest control but conventional fertilizers, and 4% reported using conventional production practices. Roughly half of the respondents plan to increase vegetable production.

High tunnels are an important tool for vegetable production in the Chequamegon Bay region of northern Wisconsin. They create a better and longer growing season creating more revenue and profit potential for commercial growers and more produce for subsistence growers. High tunnels are an economically important tool for vegetable growers and will continue to grow in popularity.