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New taps may increase maple sap production

Tuesday, 08/18/09

Ross Sneyd

Williamstown, VT



VPR Photo/R. Sneyd

Darcy Parker inspects the new maple taps.

(Host) The University of Vermont and two private companies have developed a new device that they say might boost maple sap production as much as 90 percent.

The small plastic spouts will allow sugarmakers to tap their trees earlier and keep the sap flowing longer into the season.

VPR's Ross Sneyd visited the factory where the spouts are being made and has this report.

(Sounds of spouts being inspected)

(Sneyd) It's one of the hottest afternoons of the summer, but people at Progressive Plastics in Williamstown are thinking about the end of winter when sugarmakers starting tapping the maples.

Darcy Parker of Brookfield is one of them. She's working the end of a production line that just started manufacturing a new type of maple tap.

(Parker) "Injected molded through here. Then they just come up the belt, then we separate them up here to make sure there's no non-fills or anything defective parts to the best of our eye."

(Sneyd) What Parker's inspecting is a plastic spout that fits onto the end of a maple tap. It's only a couple of inches long and looks like a toy rocket.

The spouts will be fitted with a tiny plastic ball and that's the key. Usually during sugaring season, a little bit of sap gets pulled into the tree from the system of tubes and vacuum systems. When it does, it carries tiny microbes that signal the tree to start healing the hole. As the season continues, the healing is enough to shut off the supply of sap.

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VPR/Ross Sneyd
Tim Perkins

Tim Perkins of UVM's Proctor Maple Research Center invented the spout and he says the invention all about keeping that hole open longer.

(Perkins) "With a valve in here, sap can't move backwards. And by doing that it prevents the tap hole from getting infected with microorganisms, keeps the tap hole clean and allows the sap to run longer in the springtime."

(Sneyd) The maple industry is excited.

Leader Evaporator Works in Swanton will sell the new spouts, and Bruce Gillilan is vice president at the maple industry supplier.

(Gillilan) "It could be one of the biggest things that's happened with the maple industry, as big as when plastic tubing started and what it did for the

maple industry then."

(Sneyd) Why? Because the industry believes 50 to 90 percent more sap will be produced at commercial operations because sugarmakers will be able to tap earlier and be confident the sap will flow well into spring.

(Gillilan) "And that has been tested this last year. So we're not just guessing at these numbers. That is actually research that has been done at the University of Vermont and the data has been compiled from there."

(Sneyd) Initial sales are expected to be at least 3 million and the industry hopes sales might ultimately reach 20 million.

The spouts will be good for one season and then they'll have to be recycled. So that's enough demand that Progressive Plastics expects to add two new weekend shifts to its production line.

For VPR News, I'm Ross Sneyd in Williamstown.

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