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State-grown ingredients key to new beer

*By Nick Paulson
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AMHERST -- When Central Waters Brewing Co.'s new seasonal beer, Sconnie, debuts later this month, it will be more than just a new choice for beer drinkers.

Made entirely with Wisconsin-grown ingredients, the beer is proof that a statewide effort by a handful of breweries to create a market for in-state crops is working.

A group of breweries around the state, including Central Waters, formed The Midwest Hops and Barley Cooperative a few years ago to create a link between farmers and brewers. Both crops have a history in the state, but they haven't been grown much recently. But if farmers know they can sell their crop, it could make them more likely to grow the two crops heavily used in brewing.

"We're trying to push to (get) farmers to take a risk and grow brewers barley here in Wisconsin," said Paul Graham, president of Central Waters and a member of the co-op's board of directors. "If he doesn't know what to do with the product when it's done, he's probably not going to be apt to go out and grow it."

So far, the co-op seems to be working. Central Waters bought the hops for Sconnie from a farm just west of Wausau, Stettin Hop Farms, and organic barley from two others in the state.

Stettin Hop Farms is a perfect example of what the co-op is striving for. The owner, Jonathan Wokatsch, did not begin growing hops until 2008, after meetings with co-op members. Without the assurance that he could sell his crop, Wokatsch said he wouldn't have planted it.

"Because without having a captured market, it would have been pretty difficult to connect the dots and get your market and all the expertise," he said.

The relationships the co-op is creating should only increase. Hops crops take three years to fully mature, and Wokatsch was only able to produce about 100 pounds this summer in his second year, almost all of which went to Central Waters for Sconnie. That was enough for about 1,000 gallons of the pale ale. But as his plants mature, Wokatsch hopes to produce around 1,000 pounds next year.

That much crop could allow Central Waters to produce more Sconnie, or store some of the hops for use in other batches. As more farmers follow Wokatsch's path, the possibilities for local beer, which benefits both the economy and environment, will continue to grow.

"Eventually, we'd like to be 100 percent Wisconsin-made beer," Graham said, "or at least as much as we can do."