EMERGING TIMES

...growing toward the future

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SOUTH FLORIDA PRODUCTION

FFVA Emerging Leader Development Program

In April, Class 10 of FFVA's Emerging Leader Development Program toured several farm operations in South Florida to learn about production practices and processing for a variety of crops, including celery, herbs, lettuce, radishes, sugar cane and sweet corn.

Standing deep in the nutrient-rich soil of the Everglades Agricultural Area, class members heard from FFVA board members and others on a variety of topics, including agritourism, water quality, the role of cooperatives, innovation and more.

The class also had a unique opportunity to experience Lake Okeechobee by airboat to discuss water issues relative to agriculture with industry specialists.

Pictured above is Class 10 at TKM Bengard Farms with Stephen, Ethan and Myles Basore.

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Duda's celery roots

By **Nathan Carson**
Chemical Dynamics, Inc.

To most people, South Florida is home to Miami, spring breakers and snowbirds. Few would realize that it's actually an agricultural powerhouse. As the Army Corps of Engineers drained the Everglades in the early 20th century, thousands of acres of new farmland were created. Due to it being former swampland, the soil is extraordinarily high in organic matter and is naturally fertile. This muck soil contrasts greatly with the typical sandy soil of Florida, which tends to be low in organic matter.

Shortly after being drained, A. Duda & Sons began to grow celery in the muck soil. Through a combination of direct ownership and 30-year leases from the state of Florida, Duda now manages 6,000 acres in Belle Glade. This farm is home to the world's largest contiguous block of celery but also produces crops such as sweet corn, sugar cane and radishes. It is estimated that around 3,500 acres are dedicated to vegetables with the other 2,500 acres dedicated to sugar cane.

The typical irrigation method is unique to the muck soil of South Florida. Known as seepage irrigation, this practice utilizes drain tiles and the naturally shallow aquifer to raise and lower the water table. However, due to the gradual deterioration of the muck soil, many farmers are implementing drip irrigation, particularly for high-value vegetable crops. This provides growers with greater control over moisture levels and enables better control of nutritional packages via fertigation.

One long-term challenge for muck farming is soil degradation. When the muck soil is exposed to the air, it begins to oxidize which causes the organic matter to degrade over time. To help conserve the soil, Duda often submerges its fields in between growing seasons. This slows down the oxidation process as well as adds some organic matter back to the soil. It also has the bonus of creating temporary wetland habitats for wildlife. Through the combination of better farm management and conservation practices, Duda hopes to continue growing in South Florida's muck soil for generations to come.

FFVA Emerging Leader Development Program

Raising cane with U.S. Sugar

By **Clay Pederson**
Agromillora Florida

Although several inches of rain canceled the scheduled sugar cane burn, Les Baucum's tour of U.S. Sugar's sugar cane production did not disappoint. The senior agronomist for U.S. Sugar led an eye-opening and informative tour of a "green" harvest and rail elevator.

Typically, a controlled burn of the sugar cane field is performed before harvest. This removes the excess waste vegetation from the stalks as well as burns any weeds that may be in the field. Baucum said that one can expect to bring about 3 percent trash (leaves) to the mill when the crop is burned prior to harvest and 8 percent trash when not burned. The controlled burn also helps with regrowth for this perennial crop.

Sugar cane is usually planted in September and then able to be harvested 12-15 months later. After this first harvest, U.S. Sugar will get two more harvests from the field, each a year apart. The field will then either be replanted back into sugar cane or left fallow for a year to later be planted with a high-value crop such as sweet corn.

After being mechanically harvested, the cane is loaded onto a rail car using one of U.S. Sugar's 46 rail elevators. By the way, this rail system is the longest short-line railroad in the United States. The field carts and rail cars all have individual RFID tags to identify the field, harvest crew, variety and date of the load. This RFID tag system utilizes the largest private WiFi network in the nation with all 200,000 acres of U.S. Sugar's cane production being covered! Utilizing the rail system is a great benefit to U.S. Sugar as well as to the people in the surrounding area. The 1,000 rail cars that are loaded and efficiently shipped to the mill each day during harvest would equate to 2,000 trucks on these local roads a day. With a harvest window from October through May, that is a major reduction in potential traffic congestion.

Lettuce with a legacy

By **Sherri Atwell**
Feeding Florida

One of the stops on our South Florida tour brought us to the lettuce fields managed by TKM Bengard Farms. TKM Bengard Farms is the largest lettuce grower east of the Mississippi. As we stepped off the bus onto the very rich and dark dirt field known as "muck," we were greeted by several of the Basore family members: Ethan (ELDP Class 9), Myles (ELDP Class 7) and Stephen. The Basores are in partnership with Bengard Ranch, which farms in the western United States. Lettuce is a way of life for the Basore family. They began muck farming in Ohio and Michigan and eventually transitioned down to South Florida in the 1960s.

A fourth-generation farming family with six brothers managing this large lettuce operation, the farm produces 15 varieties of lettuce and over 100 million pounds of iceberg and romaine are harvested each season. We saw firsthand the various aspects of the operation and how each family member who works in the family business plays a part in their success. They each have defined roles, from preplant/growing, harvest and food safety to employee safety, and sales and marketing. It was enlightening to hear how the generations work together to continue the tradition of farming amidst labor pressures, environmental burdens and a constant focus on combatting food safety. It was fascinating to see how business is evolving to incorporate more technology and a food safety focus while honoring the tradition of family. The tight-knit family has a strong bond, and their commitment to customer service and high food safety standards as well as changing with the times was inspiring.

ELDP shines at Rotary Club meeting

By **Eric Greenhow**
Optimum Equity Partners

FFVA ELDP Class 10 was invited as guests of Keith Wedgworth of Wedgworth Farms to the Rotary Club of Belle Glade for its lunch meeting at Community United Methodist Church. It is always a pleasure to join Rotarians for good fellowship and to learn about their local community, but this meeting was particularly exciting for us as we were able to share a little bit about FFVA, the current state of farming in Florida and our personal stories with the members.

Sonia Tighe addressed the Rotary Club's members, informing them of FFVA's Emerging Leader Development Program history and mission, and providing them a thorough overview of our organization as a whole. She also introduced our ELDP class members, and we were fortunate to get to describe our businesses to the Rotarians. Class member Morgan Stuckert of Lipman Farms was able to elaborate on her role within her company, as was Jennifer Schaal of Dundee Citrus Growers Association, which the Rotarians found intriguing.

It was nice to hear from someone so successful and accomplished as Keith Wedgworth, as he encouraged our class to take advantage of this opportunity we've been given, which I know our group will take to heart. In addition to Wedgworth, Jim Shine, Jr., FFVA board member and member of the Rotary Club of Belle Glade, commented on the dwindling number of farms and farmers in the state and also gave our group an update on Rotary International, and the amazing things their organization is achieving.

If you haven't had the opportunity to visit with the Rotary Club in your town, I'd encourage you to go to **www.rotary.org** to find the meeting times, days and location, and be their guest one day soon. I know they would love to have you, and in a short period of time, you would realize how much good they do in your area, and perhaps, it would provide you an avenue to get involved.

FFVA Emerging Leader Development Program

From field to mountain: A look at sugar processing

By **Clay Pederson**
Agromillora Florida

David Goodlett, senior vice president of government affairs and grower relations for the Sugar Cane Growers Cooperative of Florida, provided a wealth of knowledge, delivered with lively banter, on our tour of the cooperative. Due to the heavy rains that stopped harvest the week of our visit, the mill was not running. Typically, the mill is bustling to turn the roughly four million tons of sugar cane into raw sugar. The cooperative is comprised of 40-plus grower members and is responsible for harvesting, processing and marketing the crop for the growers. These growers represent around 70,000 acres of sugar cane production.

During the milling process, a waste product called bagasse is produced. This bagasse is not thrown away, however. The bagasse is used to help run the mill itself, but that is not all this byproduct can do. Tellus, a company that is jointly owned by Florida Crystals Corporation, Sugar Cane Growers Cooperative of Florida and American Sugar Refining, has a state-of-the-art facility adjacent to the mill and uses the bagasse to create packaging and food service products, such as plates and bowls that are biodegradable in less than 84 days. The class ate on the plates during our visit to the Belle Glade Rotary Club meeting.

Finishing the tour in grand fashion, the tour bus pulled into warehouse No. 5 and on both sides of the bus for as far as one could see was nothing but raw sugar. The massive "Sugar Mountain" is the last stop before the raw sugar gets shipped off for refining and processing. The scale of this Sugar Mountain was incredible, and to think, there were four other warehouses with their own Sugar Mountains!

FFVA Emerging Leader Development Program

Bedner's agritourism operation educates next generation

By **Clay Pederson**
Agromillora Florida

Bedner's Farm was the last stop on the first day of the ELDP South Florida production tour. Bedner's Farm is a family owned, 80-acre U-Pick agritourism farm with an onsite market. They also have two other fruit/vegetable market locations in the surrounding areas and 1,500 acres of bell peppers and cucumbers.

Here, customers can pick their own tomatoes, strawberries, peppers and sunflowers as well as shop for many local and hard-to-find fruits and vegetables. Customers can also take a tractor-pulled tour of the production area where they learn about how the crops are grown and other fun educational facts. Bedner's offers a pumpkin patch in the fall, live entertainment, private parties, field trips and more. To date, they have had more than 50,000 students take field trips and learn about crop production! These field trips are not only fun for the kids, but they help educate them on where food comes from and how it is grown.

When our tour of the fields finished, we were treated to homemade ice cream while listening to FFVA Board Member Marie Bedner talk about her recent experience testifying before the International Trade Commission. She recently spoke on behalf of Florida farmers seeking trade relief from imports of Mexican squash and cucumber. Listening to her experience and learning about why advocacy for our Florida growers is critically important truly left the class with a lasting impression. On behalf of ELDP Class 10, we thank you, Marie, for this tour and for your continued fight for Florida growers.

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Farming with tradition and innovation

By **Sherri Atwell**
Feeding Florida

ELDP class 10 arrived for a field tour of Hundley Farms where we were greeted by Eric and Cooper (ELDP Class 8) Hopkins amidst acres and acres of radishes ready for harvest. As we stood in the dark muck soil, the Hopkins gave us the history of the family farm that was established in 1969 in Belle Glade.

At this time, there are three generations helping to operate and run the business. They grow a diverse variety of crops from sugar cane, corn, radishes, green beans and blueberries. While the diversity of crops affords them the ability to continually use innovation to spur growth, there are some things we learned that are just tradition and not going anywhere any time soon.

Cue the mechanical harvester for radishes that was built in the 1950s. Hopkins said they have found this older harvester to work better than anything new on the market, so they continually find parts to keep it running. As we watched the harvester in action, we learned that they have employees that have been harvesting on this machine for over 25 years. Cooper said that running the harvester is one of the toughest jobs on the farm, as it takes a keen eye and precision to get the radishes out of the ground in perfect rows. The previous few days' worth of rain made the dark muck soil particularly slippery, giving the beloved radish harvesting machine of over 50 years a bit of trouble to get an accurate picking out of the field.

With the longevity of crew members, traditions of family farming, paired with a focus of being good stewards of the land, Hundley Farms was a great tour and representation of the Everglades Agricultural Area.

Family farms at heart of Pioneer cooperative

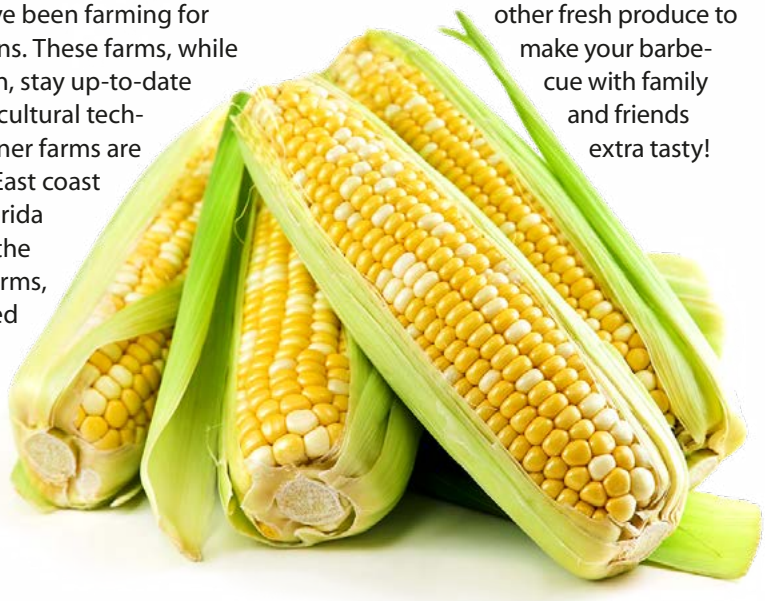
By **Sarah Hillard**
A. Duda & Sons

As we entered the impressive facility that is home to Pioneer Growers Cooperative, we were greeted by Stewart Mann, general manager, and Gary Noland, manager for Hundley Farms. Hundley Farms partners with Pioneer Growers to provide the freshest, best-tasting sweet corn and other exceptional produce selections. Hundley Farms provides the majority of the produce supplied to Pioneer and has their own packing line, which they built especially for packing corn. This streamlined packing line can pack over 25,000 crates of corn per day.

In this efficient facility, there are four tray pack lines for corn, which combined with a 175,000 sq. ft. hydro-cooler, help to ensure that quality remains high for their customers. The Pioneer facility runs year round and supplies produce based on its customers' orders.

Pioneer partners with family farms, many of whom have been farming for multiple generations. These farms, while steeped in tradition, stay up-to-date with the latest agricultural technology. These partner farms are located along the East coast of the U.S. from Florida to New York. With the support of these farms, Pioneer has attained 33 percent of the corn market. In addition to corn, they pack green beans, cabbage, radishes, celery, leafy greens, beets and sweet potatoes. It's amazing to think of how many families are fed each year with the nine million crates of produce that are processed at Pioneer!

With summer around the corner, stock up on your super sweet Florida corn and other fresh produce to make your barbecue with family and friends extra tasty!



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Sweet corn snacking with R.C. Hatton

By **Jennifer Schaal**
Dundee Citrus Growers Association

Have you ever eaten raw sweet corn standing in the middle of a corn field as you watch it being harvested? I had not until our ELDP class visited a field owned by R.C. Hatton, Inc. in Pahokee. The workers were racing against the slow crawl of the tractor, quickly tossing ears of corn onto the belt as they went down the row. The corn made its way along the conveyor belt and was catapulted into a trailer being pulled alongside by a semi. The crew turned around at the end of the harvested rows and went back across the field for more. Jonathan Allen, second-generation farmer and ELDP alum (Class 2), gave us history on his family and R.C. Hatton as he snacked on juicy sweet kernels. His father, Paul Allen, partnered with Roger Hatton, and today, R.C. Hatton is one of the largest corn and sugar cane growers in Florida. They also grow green beans and cabbage and have expanded their farming operations into South Georgia.

As we listened to Jonathan, we noticed the crew slowing down as they waited for another semi-trailer to pull alongside and be loaded. The labor shortage was apparent right then; however, it was not the first time we observed this problem. Throughout our production trip, labor shortage was a hot topic whether in the field, in the packinghouse or on the transportation side. Jonathan was doing everything in his power to work around it, but we could tell it was not easy. Wait, did someone say farming was easy?

We truly appreciated the inside look at sweet corn harvesting and will enjoy the 'vegetables' of their labor.

Farming is a family affair for TKM

By **Frederico Boscolo**
Cultiva Farms USA

Originally from Michigan, the Basore family is an expert in farming in muck soil. They saw the opportunity to expand and move the business to the Belle Glade area in Florida, an area where they knew they could farm in the same rich soil type they had back home, the black gold. This was in the 1960s.

The business is currently run by brothers Toby (production), Tom (risk management), Stephen (food safety), Brian (sales) and Michael (harvest). They collectively manage TKM Bengard Farms, which is the largest lettuce producer east of the Mississippi. ELDP alums Ethan and Myles Basore also participated in the tour.

The plant in Belle Glade serves as a logistics and cooling station for all produce coming from the farms. All product is cooled down within four hours from harvest through vacuum coolers. The four tubes allow up to 72 pallets at a time.

In season, the weekly output is 600,000 pounds per day of iceberg and about 150,000 pounds per day of romaine. The lettuce season starts in late November and goes until May; a lot of trucks are loaded daily from this location while in season.

Most of production serves the fresh-cut industry. The salad processor cannot only diversify risk from "traditional" West coast supply regions but also guarantee proximity and fresher product from Florida in less than two days trucking. Most of the product going into processing is cored in the field. A minor part of their crop goes to retail, and they market both with retailer brands and with TKM's own "Bayshore" brand.

TKM is an established, well-known company leading the whole head lettuce market on the East coast. With consumers giving more importance to local supplies, the Basore family is well-positioned to face the challenges of the near future and to keep its leading position.

FFVA Emerging Leader Development Program

Trials, innovations on display at Grower's Management

By **Morgan Stuckert**
Lipman Family Farms

Class 10 visited Grower's Management, Inc., to learn about the company's newest trials, initiatives and innovations. Grower's Management offers several decades of experience in leafy greens in the Belle Glade area, founded by David Basore and Paul Orsenigo.

On this foggy morning, we met with Paul's son, Derek, an ELDP alum (Class 2), to hear about their new varieties and growing practices. The company is known for their growing and packing operations in fresh market lettuce, a variety of leafy greens, and herbs such as parsley and cilantro, as well as sweet corn and sugar cane.

However, we took a look at some of their more niche commodities being planted on their trial acreage. Some items here included watermelon, onion, new parsley varieties, and cilantro. These commodities are being tested during season to work toward larger growth down the road.

Among these new commodities, Grower's Management is also trialing different growing techniques in order to get the most efficient yields for the best use of land.

They had both sand and muck soils in their trials, and Derek discussed how muck is subsiding in the Belle Glade area. This conversation was a great introduction to our next stop – the Belle Glade marina – where we took airboats around Lake Okeechobee to discuss its connection to and histories with agriculture.

Perspectives from Lake Okeechobee

ELDP Class 10 became the first class to tour Lake Okeechobee by airboat. This generous opportunity would not have been possible without the coordination and support from Paul and Derek Orsenigo of Grower's Management. The class would also like to thank Boat Captains Mike Challancin, Mike Goyette and Steve Goyette as well as tour guides Bill Baker, Grant Lantham and Gary Ritter for providing an incredible look at Lake Okeechobee and sharing background on its connectivity to Florida agriculture.

Life on Lake O

By **Sasha Burgin**
Burgin Farms

On the last day of our South Florida tour, ELDP Class 10 was treated to an incredible opportunity to view Lake Okeechobee by airboat. Covering nearly 730 square miles, the lake is the largest freshwater body of water in Florida and third largest in the United States. Naturally, Lake Okeechobee is teeming with wildlife and plant vegetation which adds to the nutrient-rich muck that surrounding farmlands, such as Belle Glade, use to produce amazing crops.

We learned through our airboat Captain Steve Goyette that trees such as the custard apple tree, willow trees, and sawgrass have significantly contributed to the organic matter that is produced within the lake called muck. We also saw alligators of all sizes ranging from baby to goliath. Alligators are a large part of the ecosystem of Lake Okeechobee as well as birds such as the Blue Heron, Ingus, and Coomaran. We were lucky to get the chance too see a rookery or "nest" of a blue heron on our tour.

Within Lake Okeechobee is Kreamer Island which we visited. It was settled back in the 1920s and was used for a fishing and agriculture settlement and trade stop. Kreamer Island was unfortunately hit by a hurricane which caused all 1,000 residents to perish. We were educated of the ongoing effort from the locals to maintain the island and keep the resident treehouse in good shape.

Our captain explained that he takes environmentalists out all the time and attempts to educate them that the lake is not as bad as they try to make it seem. Personally, it was profoundly educational to see how the lake works with surrounding areas naturally and how manmade interference such as the encompassing dike has contributed to the life of the lake and surrounding areas. This was truly an exceptional experience.

FFVA Emerging Leader Development Program

Lake O water level debate continues

By **Michelle Hayes**
Corteva Agriscience

The debate over Lake Okeechobee's water level is complex because it involves many stakeholders with different viewpoints on how to achieve the same goal of clean and accessible water and a thriving ecosystem for plants and animals. The stakeholders include farmers and residents of towns near the lake, residents of the eastern and western coastal towns where the St. Lucie Inlet and Caloosahatchee River are located, the Everglades, and farmers and residents of Miami-Dade.

There are some groups and politicians that want the lake level to be lowered to eliminate and/or reduce the discharges with the goal of eliminating algae blooms in coastal communities. However, lowering the lake level would be very harmful for the farming in the Everglades Agricultural Area because farmers rely on pumping water from the lake when rain is inadequate. Lowering the lake level is somewhat misguided because it does not treat the water flowing into Lake Okeechobee from the Kissimmee River watershed, which is largely untreated water that contains nutrient runoff from the densely developed surrounding area.

There are current proposals in the Florida Legislature that would address the flow of water into Lake Okeechobee from the Kissimmee River by strategically treating and storing the water into aquifers and using it when needed. This not only alleviates issues regarding the lake's discharges but also positively impacts the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan. Legislators have a unique opportunity to address critical water, environmental and economic issues with these proposals.

Editor's Note: SB 2516 – Water Storage North of Lake Okeechobee – is an appropriations bill that requires the South Florida Water Management District, in partnership with the Army Corps of Engineers, to expedite the development and implementation of aquifer storage and recovery wells north of the lake. The wells, when operational, will alleviate freshwater discharges to the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie estuaries and help to augment water supplies during the dry season. The bill passed both the Senate and the House on the last day of the 2021 session. This was a legislative priority originally established by the FFVA-helmed Together Florida coalition and will provide both water-supply and environmental benefits to South Florida stakeholders.

Collaboration key to solving Lake O issues

By **Kelly Smekens**
Bonduelle Fresh Americas

Did you know that until the year 1826, there were sprawling towns and thriving communities in the area that is now occupied by Lake Okeechobee?

ELDP Class 10 had the great privilege of becoming the first class to tour Lake Okeechobee and learn about the challenges and issues that not only the lake operations team is dealing with, but also the many industry groups that work very closely with agriculture to ensure that everyone's voice is heard.

Lake Okeechobee comprises 730 square miles of space and has 134 miles of levee. The levee is currently being reinforced with a bentonite structure, to better ensure its structural integrity. This, among other ongoing projects and operational challenges, keep quite a few people busy with working toward solutions and ideas that are complex, at the very least.

Gary Ritter works for the Florida Farm Bureau Federation and focuses a lot of his work on the regulations and relationships with the agricultural community and the Southwest Florida Water Management District. One of the goals set by SWFWMD was to see a 25 percent reduction in phosphorus in the Everglades Agricultural Area. Collectively, the farmers in the area have blown that out of the water by reaching a more than 50 percent reduction, year over year.

This is another great example of how Florida agriculture cares!

FFVA Emerging Leader Development Program

ELDP News

Ryan Atwood (Class 3) was recently appointed to the St. Johns River Water Management District Governing Board by Gov. Ron DeSantis.

FFVA 2021
77th Annual Convention
SEPTEMBER 13-15 | NAPLES

Save the date!

Mark your calendar for **Sept. 13-15, 2021**, for our next annual convention, to be held at The Ritz-Carlton in Naples. Find out why growers and allied business leaders call FFVA's annual convention the premier agriculture meeting in Florida. Registration information and full details will be shared soon.

FLORIDA SPECIALTY CROP FOUNDATION

New scholarship opportunity for college students

In an effort to instill passion for the agriculture industry, engage with a new generation of young leaders and foster a workforce dedicated to the future of Florida agriculture, FFVA and the Florida Specialty Crop Foundation have created the **Mike and Karen Stuart Scholarship**. Named in honor of former FFVA President Mike Stuart and his late wife, Karen, the new scholarship encourages and supports college students who intend to pursue a career in the specialty crop industry.

Applications are now being accepted for the scholarship and will be due July 15, 2021. Contact Sonia Tighe at Sonia.tighe@ffva.com for more information.