

EMERGING TIMES

... growing toward the future

Leadership classes converge to tour South Florida agricultural operations



Members of FFVA's Emerging Leader Development Program and the Western Growers Future Volunteer Leaders Program stand in front of the aptly nicknamed sugar mountain during a tour of the Sugar Cane Growers Cooperative.

Florida's wettest winter in recent memory was a recurring theme during the FFVA Emerging Leader Development Program's tour of South Florida agriculture operations in early March. Ditches and canals were brimming, and the Lake Okeechobee water level stood at almost 16 feet. Producers were still dealing with the effects of a warm December complete with thunderstorms and high winds, along with record rainfall in January.

Still, the 2½-day tour was packed with stops that gave the 11 members of Class 5 an up-close look at a variety of crops and production practices and a chance to have in-depth conversations with some of Florida's biggest specialty crop producers.

The ELDP group was joined by members of Western Growers Association's Future Volunteer Leaders Program. South Florida's high water levels made quite an impression on

the producers from California, where agriculture has endured a multi-year drought.

The trip was a networking opportunity for both groups. "Our programs complement each other well," said ELDP program director Sonia Tighe. "It's exciting to have the participants interact with each other and observe the operations together."

During the trip, the class presented the RCMA Child Development Center in Belle Glade with food for the families it serves. Class 5 members had conducted a food drive in the weeks before the trip.

Tour hosts were U.S. Sugar Corporation, Sugar Cane Growers Cooperative of Florida, TKM Bengard, Vegpro International, R.C. Hutton, Lipman, Southern Gardens, A. Duda & Sons, L&M Farms, J&J Family of Farms and Grower's Management.



R.C. Hatton weathers the winter storms



by Ashley Layson
Farm Credit of Florida

Tough times never last; tough people do. This could be said of many South Florida farmers, and it especially rings true of the Allen family with R.C. Hatton, Inc.

Severe flooding in December and January damaged yields, completely wiping out some of their fields.

"It wasn't the cold that got us this year, it was the rain," said Dan Allen at the company's South Bay packinghouse, where he is focusing on better bean processing to improve on speed and quality and fewer broken beans.

Production manager Jonathan Allen (and Class 2 alum) said flooding at their Clewiston fields created the need for 50-man ditch crews working to get the water out of the rows. "We saw a lot of rain on this farm. We lost a lot of fertilizer because it's just gone. Everything is gone," he said.

But even with rain clouds above, the future for R.C. Hatton is bright, including one deal that seemingly fell out of the clear blue sky.

"I got a call from a guy out of Ohio who needed cabbage -- lots of cabbage -- to make coleslaw for Kentucky Fried Chicken. It sounded like a great deal except we had never grown cabbage before," Allen said. "So we planted it, purchased special equipment to harvest it, learned how to use the equipment and are currently sending 40 truckloads a week to the packinghouse. We have no problem getting rid of cabbage."

And Allen hopes to only increase those numbers. Due to the success of the cabbage crop this year, he says they plan to plant more next year, and they hope Mother Nature will be a little more cooperative.



At Hugh Branch, Dan Allen is focusing on better bean processing, hoping to improve on both speed and quality.

Citrus industry fighting challenges



by Amanda McClure
West Coast Tomato/
Building Cleaning Solutions

Southern Gardens in Clewiston is one of the largest suppliers of pure Florida not-from-concentrate orange juice. Denise Roth began our tour of Southern Gardens with a wealth of information. She explained that Southern Gardens is incredibly versatile, which allows it to be both the sole supplier of a finished orange juice product to Kroger Stores nationwide, while also being able to provide one ingredient that contributes to Tropicana's finished orange juice product. She also explained that the Florida Department of Agriculture inspects every single truckload of fruit that arrives at the plant to make sure the oranges are meeting maturity standards. The increasing government oversight required at the plant

is a result of increased technology that has driven higher standards among customers. Increased technology has caused customers to become more sophisticated, giving customers the ability to regularly compare juice products against other juice products.

Rick Kress, Southern Gardens' president, explained the major challenges facing the citrus industry. He described these challenges as a "perfect storm" that must gain public awareness and improve if we want to continue growing citrus in Florida. First, the supply of fruit is decreasing due because of citrus greening disease, which also is causing juice production to drop. Next, imports from Brazil continue to flood the market while the cost to grow citrus is continually increasing (it now costs about \$2,500 per acre). What's more, consumers are incorrectly linking juice to obesity and diabetes, while at the same time those consumers are drinking less orange juice because there are so many choices of juice products on the shelf. Kress said he hopes that increased technology and finding genetic resistance to greening will save the Florida citrus industry.



Sugar production from field to table



by Bradley Ferguson
Florida Pacific Farms

At the Sugar Cane Growers Cooperative of Florida the group was given an in-depth look at its operations by Barbara Miedema, vice president of public affairs and communication. The co-op is comprised of 45 small- to medium-sized growers who grow about 70,000 acres of sugar cane. The cooperative produces more than 350,000 tons of raw sugar annually.

The cooperative mechanically harvests an average of 500 acres of sugar cane per day, and the mill can grind as much as 26,000 tons per day. At the mill, the juice is pressed out of the stalks and the juice is concentrated into raw sugar and blackstrap molasses. The raw sugar is then sold to various refineries that are jointly owned by the Sugar Cane Growers Cooperative and Florida Crystals Corp. The refineries produce 1,400 products sold in 99 different countries. The molasses is primarily sold as animal feed. The leftover fibrous portion of the stalk, called bagasse, is used as a fuel source to create steam for electricity generation for the facility. This conserves more than 31 million gallons of fuel each year.

The Sugar Cane Growers Cooperative also is committed to protecting and preserving the environment. The processing plants' stacks emit primarily water vapor after special scrubbers eliminate more than 90 percent of particulate matter. The co-op growers are also using BMPs designed to reduce nutrient runoff. They have reduced nutrient runoff by 55 percent and 173 million gallons of clean water flow from the Everglades Agricultural Area to the Everglades ecosystem each year.

Lipman: Producing a bounty of products



by Ben Lahr
Driscoll's

Lipman Produce is America's largest field tomato grower, and with operations in more than 30 locations, it is able to supply a more local product to consumers. In doing so, the company also can reduce environmental impacts and transportation costs. So much so that since 2005 Lipman has decreased its diesel use by 23.3 percent per acre. The company also recycles its field plastic at a facility in LaBelle, and has converted a would-be waste product by feeding about 80 million to 120 million pounds of unmarketable product to livestock each year.

To give us an inside view, Jamie Williams, director of Florida farming, met us at Farm #9 in Loxahatchee, where he greeted our group with an encouragement to vacate our bus lest we get it stuck in the field. Instead, he suggested we take the workers' bus as he

explained that once the pickers clock in, they are taken directly to the specific area of the farm where they are picking. About 40 percent of Lipman's workforce is H-2A, and the company houses about 90 percent of its workforce.

As it was a fair distance to where the primary picking was going on for the day, Williams used the time along the way to explain how Lipman is vertically integrated from seed to transplants to harvesting. Lipman produces many different items including cucumbers, peppers, eggplant, squash, potatoes, and watermelon as well as organic, fresh cut, and packed produce. With such diversity, it is no wonder that Lipman takes training very seriously and all employees are trained and verified before they are able to start working.

Such dedication to quality influences all areas of production. Lipman recently reevaluated bucket size and shape for harvesting tomatoes, a move which has increased efficiency. This efficiency is tempered with the knowledge of when to pick. Williams taught us to identify a good green tomato because they cannot be picked red -- they would be too ripe. As our tour came to an end, we arrived back where we started, but this time with a new sense of appreciation for what it takes to make Florida tomatoes taste so good.



The classes were treated to an authentic experience at Lipman Produce. After multiple years of getting stuck in the sand in the charter bus the folks at Lipman lined up a traditional work crew bus for transportation around the farm.



Getting a front-row seat to sugar cane production



by John Evans
Maury L. Carter & Associates, Inc.

Before our trip to southeast Florida, the closest I had been to the sugar industry was from U.S. Highway 441. I understood the basic principles of the sugar industry, but it was as an outsider. I'd never had a front-row seat. I had never been on a sugar cane field. Most of those on the tour with us were in the same boat. Then things changed.

Our class was accompanied by the Western Growers Association's leadership class. Les Baucum of United States Sugar Corporation gave us a tour of the sugar industry. He was incredibly knowledgeable and in effect gave us a crash course in Sugar Cane 101. I learned more in that 90 minutes about the sugar industry than I had the first 30 years of my life. His curriculum included when to plant, how long the cane grows, how it is managed during growing, how to harvest cane, the logistical challenges of getting the raw cane to the processing facilities, and most importantly, how to properly burn a sugar cane field before harvesting (a favorite for everyone).

We learned that U.S. Sugar is the largest sugar cane producer in the United States, producing 700,000 metric tons a year. The company farms about 187,000 acres south of Lake Okeechobee. Florida produces more sugar cane than any other state (Louisiana has more acreage, but Florida produces more product). U.S. Sugar has its own rail system for transporting cane directly to the processing plant, allowing for faster and more efficient logistical practices.

Burning before harvest removes excess material that the processing plant doesn't have to take in. This can save a lot of time and energy, as this "dead weight" can be costly. Burning destroys dead vegetation and other non-necessary plant matter that the harvester would otherwise collect. Baucum arranged for our class to be on site during a burn. It was an incredible experience to witness. The fire burns hot, and it burns fast. Not what I was expecting.

We are grateful for Les Baucum's insight and appreciate the time he spent in educating us.



Veg-Pro International demonstrated their harvesting techniques for baby red romaine lettuce.



The classes were able to see the different stages of sugar cane (in this photo a young crop).



Burning sugar cane prior to harvest removes excess material from the stalks which saves time and energy at the processing plant.

Vegpro puts a premium on quality products



by Ben Lahr
Driscoll's

Vegpro International provided our class with a tour of its Belle Glade facility where the company harvests, receives and packs leafy greens, shipping all over the East Coast. Vegpro products include shallots, leeks, onions, carrots and lettuce, as well as mix kits to prepare your own salads.

Daniel Cavazos from Vegpro (and a graduate of Class 3) explained that quality is a primary focus, and their harvesting techniques help keep their product clean. We were able to witness these techniques firsthand as we watched baby red romaine lettuce being harvested. A large, mechanized harvester slowly rolled over the lettuce, delicately trimming the leaves and depositing them into trays that went into another tractor that took the product to the facility.

Founded in 1998 from a family business, Vegpro has vegetable operations in Florida and Quebec. Doug Enders gave us a brief description of the operations at the cooler, where he explained that they are able to keep East Coast customers supplied with product depending on which growing season has the most crops. Because it's located in Florida and Canada, Vegpro can reduce delivery time to three days or less. Enders reinforced the importance of quality as he explained their packaging operations. They use optical sensors to look for anything that is not product and remove it. They also run their products in a single layer on a belt while jets of air remove debris. Their products are then packaged into unique plastic boxes rather than the generic bags other producers use. As members of Fresh From Florida, they further differentiate their Florida products from the competition, as well as promoting Florida produce, on their packaging and have seen a benefit in the market from doing so.



UAVs, Lake Okeechobee and South Florida farming



by Kevin Yue
Lipman Produce

Our group was treated to a demonstration of an unmanned aerial vehicle – or drone – with Highland Precision Ag, a company specializing in the use of UAVs for agriculture. Paul Orsenigo of Grower's Management Inc. and a longtime board member of FFVA invited Highland to show the ELDP and Western Growers classes the potential of UAVs in farming.

Wade Carter of Highland explained how UAVs have been used in recent years to help growers more quickly get data on their farms such as soil moisture, disease and pest pressures, and crop yields. UAVs have been adapted by companies like Highland to include sensor packages that use different lenses to capture data as they engage in their "mission" pattern over the selected area. The UAV passes over the fields and uses the lenses to obtain the required information, which is then transferred to a central computer and sent to the grower for use. The data analytics assists growers in making decisions faster and more precisely, as it minimizes the need for time-consuming manual inspection of the fields. The UAV sensors can also detect issues before they are noticed in the field, such as flooding and diseases, which help the grower respond to problems even before they are visually recognized.

After the demonstration, Orsenigo took the FFVA and WGA participants on a tour of Lake Okeechobee and explained the critical importance of the lake to growers in the Everglades Agricultural Area. He discussed the current problems facing the lake and their impact on the region, including the record water levels and downriver effects of discharging water to the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie estuaries.



Highland Precision Ag provided an up-close look at unmanned aerial vehicles (left and top right). Class 5 conducted a food drive which culminated in an impressive delivery to the Belle Glade RCMA center between tour stops (bottom right).



RCMA helps rural farm families in need



by Josh Temple
DuPont Crop Protection

The last stop on Day 2 of the ELDP South Florida tour was at the Redlands Christian Migrant Association's Belle Glade Child Development Center. This was one of the most rewarding because we were able to help families in need by dropping off non-perishable food items. Class 5 members had collected food items for several weeks leading up to the trip. We filled the cargo hold of our bus with food items such as canned goods, rice, beans, pasta, cereal, and other staples.

RCMA provides quality child care and early education for children of migrant farmworkers

and rural low-income families throughout Florida. It's the largest non-profit child care provider in the state, serving more than 7,500 children. The RCMA was founded in 1965 in the Redlands near Homestead as a child care alternative to migrant workers having to take children to the fields with them. From the two child care centers in Homestead, RCMA has grown today to 71 centers in 21 Florida counties. All serve the rural poor, and most serve the children of Hispanic immigrants. More recently, RCMA has broadened its offerings to include after-school programs for children ages 6 to 16. It also has opened charter schools in Immokalee, Fort Myers and Wimauma. The Wimauma location has added a middle school to serve grades K-7. Donations to the RCMA can be made at http://www.rcma.org/donate_new.html



J & J Family Farms: Peppered with growth



by Leigh Ann Wynn
Warner University

On our last morning of the trip, we spent time with Dick Bowman from J & J Family of Farms of Loxahatchee. This family operation dates back almost 100 years to its origins as Erneston & Sons Produce. It became J & J Produce in 1983 when twin grandsons Jimmy and Jerry Erneston continued the family reputation of quality produce.

Today, J & J Family of Farms has strategically positioned itself as a successful national produce supplier and grows on more than 14,000 acres of farmland. They operate packing and cooling facilities in Florida, Georgia, Tennessee, North Carolina, Arizona, Mexico and the Dominican Republic.

J & J is primarily a bell pepper grower, packer and shipper, but the company also grows eggplant, cucumber, squash, zucchini, tomatoes and some specialty peppers. They

recently formed a strategic partnership with Thomas Produce to capitalize on synergies between their production operations and their sales forces.

The company is focused on connecting directly with retailers and is looking into expanding its colored pepper offerings. On this particular day, Dick Bowman showed us his mule train that was used to pack eggplant. He also talked about the high bacteria pressure on their East Coast farms due to the high volume of rain this season.

Farmers are not sitting on the sidelines when it comes to technology. Bowman mentioned how they use a scanner system to log piecework for their individual workers to help streamline their recordkeeping and increase efficiency.

Bowman also discussed their accountability and social responsibility when it comes to their workers. They take the treatment of the workers very seriously and protect the integrity of the product they harvest by not allowing pinhookers in their fields.

A few of us held one of the pepper buckets after it was filled with green peppers, and let me tell you, I definitely could not throw even one of those up into the truck, much less dozens a day. This trip has made me appreciate the hard work that goes into the vegetables I eat every day.

TKM talks all things lettuce



by Lauren Graham
The Andersons, Inc.

As our tour bus drove through lettuce fields, Stephen Basore of TKM Bengard discussed the farm's operations with Class 5. As fourth-generation growers, he and his brothers' company is the largest lettuce producer east of the Mississippi River. They sell to retail and the food service industry.

Since last season, TKM has grown about 10 percent. It produces 1,000 to 1,200 bins of iceberg lettuce a day and 10,000 to 15,000 bins of romaine lettuce a day. These two are the highest volume by far in the fields. Typically they have five crews wrapping, directly employing 500 people and indirectly employing 500. The lettuce is hand-harvested.

Producing lettuce from seed to market takes 70 to 75 days. After harvest, the product goes into a cooler, where it sits for up to four hours. Because it is perishable, it ships out the same day. By September, all contracts are typically finalized for planting (all pre-sold). From there, TKM just needs to produce. Any extra product they harvest outside of the contracts is extra money.

To prevent weeds from growing and insects from coming into the fields, they use a practice of flooding. To assist with water flow, they create lines in the fields to help flow the water into drainage ditches, which then flow into a canal system. They only use overhead irrigation once after planting for germination. After that, seepage irrigation is used. Water that leaves the field is cleaner than Lake Okeechobee, Basore said.



Dick Bowman with J & J Family of Farms spoke candidly with class members about the challenges they have faced with excessive wind and rain on their current crop of bell peppers.



L&M impresses with size, scope of operation



by Marshal Sewell
Seminis Vegetable Seeds

Diversification was a key theme during our recent visit with Adam Lytch of L&M Companies. Our Emerging Leaders Class 5 group, along with our fellow young agriculturalists from the Western Growers Association, had the great fortune of touring the L&M packinghouse in LaBelle while Adam discussed the size and scope of the operation.

The Raleigh, N.C.-based company boasts an impressive Florida operation. With farms stretching across eight counties statewide and encompassing nearly 8,500 acres, L&M provides a large amount of produce for the retail market from its Florida fields. Its wide array of product offerings includes peppers, cucumbers, squash, watermelons, onions and potatoes, allowing L&M to serve as a one-stop shop for buyers. One testament to L&M's commitment to the quality of its produce and the efficiency of its operation is its investment in a state-of-the-art optical sorter for its pepper grading line. We saw this remarkable new technology at work as an optical lens system recognized fruit with discolorations, blemishes and other lackluster physical qualities and graded them out automatically.

Lytch also offered his perspective on the recent weather-related struggles that local growers have endured, along with a future outlook for the upcoming season. He discussed the current state of the industry and remarked on the steps L&M is taking to ensure a consistent supply of quality produce. Our group was also very impressed by L&M's commitment to customer service, as he spoke on the wide variety of product and packaging offerings that L&M provides in order to meet the demands of its buyers.

Labor and water remain top challenges



by Bradley Ferguson
Florida Pacific Farms

Our trip concluded with an industry roundtable discussion about issues facing agriculture in Florida and California. Panel members were FFVA President Mike Stuart; Ken Barbic, lobbyist for Western Growers Association; and Matt Joyner, director of federal affairs for Agriculture Commissioner Adam Putnam.

The panel named labor and water as the top challenges for agriculture today. Labor is a major issue in both Florida and California. "Florida has become the largest user of the H-2A program since 2014-2015, and 75 percent of the citrus harvest is done using H-2A labor," said Stuart. Barbic added that California is increasingly moving toward using more H-2A workers.

The last major attempt at immigration reform was in 2013 when a comprehensive

immigration bill was passed by the Senate but not in the House. That bill was backed by a coalition of agricultural producers. The panel agreed that the public argument against immigration is concerning. There is a lot of uncertainty surrounding the immigration issue, and this year's elections will play a pivotal role in future federal policy.

Water also is a major issue in both California and Florida. The Florida Legislature just passed a comprehensive water policy in January that addresses quality and quantity issues. Even with the new legislation, Florida will still face water challenges in the future. "The current projections say that by 2030 Florida will be facing a 1 billion gallon per day water deficit," Joyner said. Water has always been a major issue in California, Barbic said, citing a lack of rain and problems of storage and conveyance. California is experiencing a severe drought. Recent rains from the El Nino weather pattern have provided some short-term relief, but it will take several wetter-than-normal years for the state to recover.



FFVA Board Member Adam Lytch hosted the classes at the L&M packinghouse in LaBelle. They got to see bell pepper grading, sorting and packing.



Special thanks to the Florida's Natural Growers Foundation for providing a grant to the ELDP that was used to provide the transportation for this production tour.

Class 5 will travel to California in May for their next session. Look for those stories in the next issue.

A. Duda and Sons striving for success



by Casey Simmons Runkles
Simmons Farms, Inc.

Rob Atchley, general manager of citrus groves for Duda and class 1 graduate, provided a great lunch for the group and gave a very detailed tour of its LaBelle citrus operations and a history of the company.

In 1920, Andrew Duda and his three sons settled in Oviedo. They started their farming operation with 40 acres of celery; today they have massive land holdings in Florida, Texas and California. The family-owned company is now in its fifth generation. In the 1960s, the family purchased the 25,000-acre operation that our class toured. On this land, there are a 1,400-head cow-calf operation, orange groves, 1,600 acres of sugar cane and 500 acres of sod. They lease the remaining land to other farmers who grow tomatoes, squash and eggplant.

In 2004, with citrus canker at its peak, the company pushed up about 2,500 acres of trees. At that time they switched to more acreage of cattle. In 2011, Coca-Cola and Minute Maid worked a deal with local growers to replant citrus trees. A. Duda and Sons has a 20-year contract with these companies to provide citrus for their juices. The companies agreed to a 3,000-acre expansion. About 2,500 of those acres are planted today.

There are several innovative ways that they are growing these citrus trees to help reduce the loss from greening. Trees are planted much closer together in a high-density pattern. A normal acre will contain about 151 trees; the high-density planting will have as many as 300 trees per acre. As soon as they notice any disease with trees they remove them and replant. These new trees only grow about 15 feet tall, which helps the workers during harvest and cuts down the need to prune the tops of the trees. The citrus industry is working hard to see that we will continue to have Florida fresh orange juice, but there are lots of challenges and A. Duda and Sons is striving for success.

ELDP NEWS



1: Justin Roberson (Class 1) and his wife, Ashley, welcomed Ethan Ellis Roberson on April 2.

John Evans (Class 5) and his wife, Ann, welcomed John Arthur Evans, Jr. - "Jack" on April 17.

April Roe Porter (Class 1) recently attended the PMA Women's Fresh Perspectives Conference connecting with other women in the produce industry. Next year's conference is in Miami and she hopes to see more FFVA members there.



2: Adam Trott (Class 1) and his wife, Aimee, welcomed Paige Rutledge Trott on October 19, 2015.

Lauren Graham (Class 5) has been promoted to Marketing Communications Administrator for The Andersons.

Clayton Norman (Class 3) has accepted a position with Bayer CropScience. He will now cover Florida as the Senior Customer Business Advisor.

Jennifer Lytch (Class 1) has been promoted to Territory Manager for The Andersons.