Touring Ag Officials Get Taste of S.J.

Members are From Throughout North America

By JOE COLANERO

BIVALVE — Agricultural marketing officials from the far reaches of the U.S. and Canada recently toured the Haskin Shellfish Research Station here, kicking off their visit to southern New Jersey agricultural facilities.

Eighty members of the North American Agriculture Marketing Officials (NAAMO) converged at the Tropicana Casino in Atlantic City on July 17 for a four-day strategy session aimed at improving agricultural marketing services.

N.J. Agricultural Secretary Charles M. Kuperus welcomed the delegates, underscoring the

(continued on page 13)
AG. OFFICIALS

(continued from front page)

importance of their mission: "It's one thing to grow delicious, nutritious agricultural products, yet quite another to make sure that consumers and processors are aware of how good they are and where they are available.

"New Jersey," he added, "is privileged to host this conference of NAAMO, which tackles these issues on a continent-wide scale."

The event, including lectures and a tour, was the first hosting by New Jersey for the group, and was led by Al Murray, director of Marketing & Development for the N.J. Department of Agriculture. The 2004 NAAMO conference was in New Mexico.

In Bivalve, on the Maurice River, conference members learned that researchers at Haskin's focus on commercially important shellfish species for New Jersey.

As one of the researchers pointed out by gesturing in the direction of still-existing packing sheds nearby, the area once thrived from the prosperous oyster industry, such that the town of Port Norris, in apfly named Commercial Township, once boasted a department store, a theatre and other local businesses.

In the riverfront lab itself, graduate student Sean Boyd explained the studies he is doing to determine the impact of mosquito spray concentrations on the mortality of horseshoe crabs, a.k.a. king crab to locals. He pointed out the animals are not a species of crab, but are more closely related to spiders.

Horseshoe crabs are important to the ecology of the Delaware Bay, he told his visitors, not only as their eggs feed the annual bird migrations, but as use for bait by commercial fishermen and for pharmaceutical use. While current populations are threatened, it's difficult to imagine that the horseshoe crabs were once so numerous and their harvesting so unregulated that local farmers used them as fertilizer.

In another nearby testing lab at the Haskin facility, lab assistant Iris Burt was studying the Vibrio group concentrations in Delaware Bay oysters for public health concerns. While Vibrio, which is naturally occurring in all waters, is not harmful to the oyster itself, the disease can cause illness but is rarely serious, except for those with compromised immune systems. Cooking will destroy the Vibrio bacteria.

The NAAMO group then motored to the Eastern ProPack peach processing facility in Glassboro, a cooperative that works with 30 New Jersey fruit growers to process, grade and ship fresh-market peaches to distant markets.

Philip Neary, general manager of the Jersey Fruit Cooperative, greeted the tour goers at the extensive processing plant, which packs and ships 450,000-600,000 boxes of Jersey Fresh peaches each year. Neary told the group that ProPack deals only with fresh-market peaches, as the economies for processing aren't supportive.

In response to a member's question, Neary explained that no peaches at ProPack are stored in a "CA" facility, which is a controlled atmosphere environment that reduces the respiration of peaches for longer storage, but at a noticeable deterioration of quality.

"Jersey peaches," Neary said, "are eaten usually within a few days of harvest, so they are a superior, juicy fruit that has gained favor with customers."

Neary told his visitors that, while it is obvious that New Jersey fruit growers have easy access to a large population in the Northeast corridor, this same lucrative market is also inviting to other producers resulting in a vigorously intense competition, sometimes to the point that growers' profit margins can easily evaporate.

Marty Earnhart, a NAAMO member from Montana, said he was surprised to learn of the diversity and of the small acreage of New Jersey farmers, and of the variety of fish and shellfish caught off the Jersey coast and the Delaware Bay.

Earnhart was also impressed with the success of the Jersey Fresh marketing program that was initiated by former N.J. Agricultural Secretary Arthur Brown.

Returning on the evening bus, Ag marketing specialist Ron Good dutifully pointed out local landmarks—but also alerted and warned the members of the dreaded Jersey Devil.

There were no sightings.

Joe Colonero provides the Market Memo and Down Jersey Foodways columns for Reminder readers.