

**From:** Kritz, Karen  
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Wednesday, July 20, 2005  
By WILLIAM H. SOKOLIC  
Courier-Post Staff

South Jersey put its agricultural wares in the spotlight Tuesday for an elite group of marketing professionals looking to trade notes on how to promote "buy local" movements.

About 100 delegates of the North American Agricultural Marketing Officials organization toured Haskin Shellfish Research Laboratory in Port Norris, a peach-packing plant in Glassboro, a winery and a blueberry farm.

"We get a chance to show off New Jersey agriculture," said Al Murray of Audubon, a marketing director for the state Department of Agriculture.

"When you think of New Jersey, you don't realize how diverse the state is."

The group, representing agricultural marketers from every state and the Canadian provinces, is holding its annual conference in Atlantic City this week, marking the first time the organization has visited New Jersey.

A peach-packing operation run by Jersey Fruit Cooperative in Glassboro was one of the stops on the tour. The company distributes imported fruits and sells and distributes domestic crops including blueberries and peaches, shipping primarily to chain stores throughout the U.S. and Canada.

Peaches have a short window of opportunity, going from rock-hard to ripe in less than two days, said Philip E. Neary, director of operations & grower relations for Sunny Valley International Inc., one of the owners of the packing plant.

Most Jersey Fruit products go out of state because of the economics: they can't compete with prices from out-of-state competitors.

"But no one really complains that it's not locally grown," Neary said.

One of the goals of Jersey Fresh is to convince consumers to ask for Jersey-grown fruits and vegetables, Murray said.

No matter what the crop, growers face shared marketing challenges.

"The marketing structures we deal with transfer across species and crops," said Kevin Edberg, executive director for the Cooperative Development Services, of St. Paul, Minn.,

which helps farmers and others form cooperatives.

The annual organization meeting allows marketing directors to not only share ideas but to address issues of common concern.

Such gatherings resolve issues before they become politically contentious, said Andy Rankine of Ontario, Canada, program manager for Foodland Ontario, an arm of the Ministry of Agriculture.

Foodland Ontario is the province's version of Jersey Fresh.

"I come here to learn marketing ideas and strategies that can help our growers," said Laura M. Johnson, bureau chief for international trade and domestic market development for the Idaho State Department of Agriculture.

At the Haskin Shellfish Research Laboratory, visitors were shown the various efforts by the lab to minimize, if not eradicate, diseases such as Dermo, MSX and Vibrio bacteria, which can decimate the shellfish harvest.

Haskin is the only lab of its kind in New Jersey, and one of a handful in the U.S. "So this is pretty unique," said Dave Bushek, assistant professor at Rutgers. While not agriculture in the traditional sense, more and more, shellfish are seen as commodities to be grown and harvested, often via aquaculture, Bushek said.

"Oysters are considered a crop," Bushek said.

The shellfish lab was impressive, said Joe Gainer, assistant commissioner for the Tennessee Department of Agriculture. Though Tennessee has no such industry, the research done by universities in both states are invaluable to agriculture.

The conference concludes Thursday.

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