

THE 2006 BECKER FORUM: WITH CUSTOMERS IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT, WHAT ROAD WILL YOUR BUSINESS FOLLOW?

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Introduction:

The Planning Committee for the 2006 Empire State Fruit and Vegetable Expo identified demands of the marketplace for information about safe and sustainable production practices as the topic of the Becker Forum. The Becker Forum is a semi-annual feature of the New York State Fruit and Vegetable Expo that focuses on emerging topics of importance to the fruit and vegetable industries. A committee comprised of the authors of this report was formed to plan and run the Forum. .

Objectives and Procedures:

The objectives of the Forum were to give growers information that would assist them in

- 1) deciding whether their business would find it feasible and profitable to participate in markets that demand information about production practices and
- 2) to help them understand the requirements of those markets as well as the alternate markets without demands for production information.

Through a series of discussions with fruit and vegetable farmers and knowledge of the issues from several ongoing projects to track agricultural production practices for the marketplace, the committee settled on the basic form of the discussion. An introductory speaker was needed to lay the groundwork of consumer demands and interests; a second speaker was needed to give an overview of food company reactions to consumer interest in sustainable production practices; a third speaker to give perspective on future regulated record keeping requirements. Once the basic information was presented the committee decided that the primary objective would be to facilitate discussion regarding the reactions of food processors, fresh market buyers, and farmers. This was done through a series of 3 panel discussions with representatives from the 3 sectors. Ample time was left for audience questions and discussion

The committee considered the role of moderator to be crucial for the success of the program. Larry Van de Valk, the Director of the LEAD NY Program at Cornell was chosen as moderator. A resource notebook was prepared and copies were distributed to each attendee. A list of items in the resource notebook is shown in Appendix I.

Proposals were written and funding obtained from the Cornell Cooperative Extension Vegetable Program Work Team and the New York State Integrated Pest Management Program. This funding plus support from the Expo planning committee, Pirrung Auctioneers, Inc. and the companies that employ some of the speakers allowed us to bring in high quality speakers from across the US to address the issues. The agenda with the speakers' names is shown in the Appendix II. An evaluation form asking for input on the quality of the presentations and discussions was distributed and collected.

Several exhibitors were invited to set up information on tables at the Forum.

Results:

One hundred and one individuals attended the Becker Forum on Feb 13, 2006 in Syracuse. Table 1 shows the range of professional interests of the attendees. The vast majority of attendees were from central and western New York with a few from eastern New York, other states, and Canada. A snowfall along the east coast shut down several airports meaning that the keynote speaker, Dr. John Lord, was unable to attend. However, through a phone hookup and electronic transfer of his slides, he was able to successfully make his presentation and take questions. He reported that the most important product attributes for consumers are convenience

and flavor. Once a producer meets consumer needs in these areas, LOHAS (Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability) attributes are important to some segments of the marketplace.

There were 36 evaluation forms returned. The overall evaluation of the meeting was 38% excellent, 59% good, 3% fair (1 person), and 0% poor.

Table 1: Number of individuals attending representing each area

Vegetable grower	Berry grower	Tree Fruit grower	Educator	Industry	Other
18 ^x	14 ^x	34 ^x	18	21	13

^xTotal number of growers was 49. Fourteen of the growers indicated multiple crop types.

The Cornell Good Agricultural Practices (GAPS) program and the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) set up exhibits at the Forum.

Discussion:

Attendance was high and interest was strong in the topic as indicated by the high level of participation in the discussion. There were opportunities for debate among audience members, among panelists and among the representatives from different sectors. By all indications we judge the program to have been quite successful and comments indicate the audience would like more information on many of the topics presented. Dr. John Lord's presentation on consumer trends, interests and needs sparked the most interest at the meeting. Other topics varied in ratings as to what people found most and least valuable, depending on their business situation.

Selected comments from the evaluation sheets included:

-Most useful:

- The open discussions and debate. Hearing different viewpoints from all aspects of the industry.
- Food safety awareness and marketing ideas
- Discussions with the buyers/marketers
- Many mentions of Dr. Lord's talk
- Communicating with processors, suppliers, merchandisers, fresh market marketers

-Additional information needed:

- How to market IPM to your customers
- Grower needs for IPM related education
- More info on innovations in record-keeping methods and equipment
- How will growers survive with the extra costs involved with farming
- Continued discussion on NY or regional programs without duplicating systems or programs etc
- Curious about conflict of consumer convenience vs consumer demand for sustainability

-Least useful

- Not one thing; you learn something from everything
- None; all great!
- Everything was useful
- Nothing

Appendix I: List of items in the resource folder

Lord, J.B. The Changing Consumer Drives the Food Industry.
Green, T.A. Successes and Failures with Eco-labels
Kuepper, G. Organic Farm Certification & the National Organic Program
Carroll, J, D. Breth, M. Fargione. Eurepgap Audit Workbook for New York State Tree Fruit Growers (brochure)
Carroll, J. TRAC software: Recordkeeping and reporting software for fruit crops. (brochure)
The NEW FARM. New Farm Guide to US Organic Certifiers. www.newfarm.org
Consumers Union. The Consumers Union Guide to Environmental Labels. www.ecolabels.org
CU GAPS Program. Cornell University Good Agricultural Practices Program
www.gaps.cornell.edu
USDA. Good Agricultural Practices; Good Handling Practices.
Web Resources for more information on Good Agricultural Practices (GAPS) protocols. (list)

Appendix II: Becker Forum Program

The marketplace for fruits and vegetables is changing rapidly. Emerging trends include buyer expectations for documenting growing practices and meeting specifications for anything from fertilizer and pesticide use to farm working conditions. Will your farm benefit from responding to this trend? What challenges are ahead if you position your business to enter this market sector? What challenges are ahead if you choose not to? At this year's Becker forum you will have the opportunity to learn about this emerging trend, interact with buyers across the spectrum of market sectors, and with growers who have positioned their businesses to meet a variety of buyer criteria. You can't afford NOT to be there!

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 13

Moderator: Larry Van de Valk, Director of LEAD NY

9:15 Registration, coffee, pastries

9:40 Welcome and introductions

9:45 The changing consumer drives the food industry -- and the industry needs to be aware - John Lord, St. Joseph's University, Philadelphia, PA

10:40 Successes and failures with eco-labels - Thomas Green, IPM Institute of North America, Madison, WI

11:10 Break

11:30 Processing buyer perspectives - Ron Deim, Sysco Corporation; Robert Norris, Mott's Inc.; Rhett Smith, Birds Eye Foods

12:30 Lunch (*provided*) and view displays

1:30 What's on the regulatory horizon? - Harvey Reissig, Cornell Pesticide Management and Education Program

1:50 Fresh market buyer perspectives - Kaarie Stannard, New York Apple Sales; David McClurg, NY Apple Association, Byron King, Baldor Specialty Foods

3:05 Break

- 3:30 Grower perspectives - challenges and benefits to my business -**
*Randy Paddock, Lake Ontario Fruit Inc.; Brian Nicholson, Red Jacket Farms; Jeff Kubecka, Kubecka Farms; **Dave Votypka, Votypka Farms***
- 4:45 Overview of the resource notebook**
- 5:00 Social (*cash bar, light refreshments*)**
- 6:00 Adjourn**

This Forum is open to all growers and associated businesses. PRE-REGISTRATION IS REQUIRED. The fee for the program is \$15 per person and includes coffee/refreshments, lunch and the resource notebook. Please fill out the pre-registration form (center of this program). For more information, contact Julie Kikkert at 1-585-394-3977 ext. 34 or e-mail at jrk2@cornell.edu.