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The Produce News

National Watermelon Month among many initiatives unveiled at NWA convention

by Joel Gebet

ORANGE BEACH, AL (02/29/2008) - Southern hospitality was in abundant supply for the 420 attendees of the National Watermelon Association's 94th annual convention, who were treated to a "slice of paradise" Feb. 20-24, here, at the Perdido Beach Resort.

The association and the National Watermelon Promotion Board both unveiled several new initiatives during the convention, the most notable of which was a congressional resolution proclaiming July as National Watermelon Month.

The resolution was expected to be signed into law by the end of this month, Bob Morrissey, the association's executive director, said during his state of the NWA speech at the general session and breakfast Feb. 23.

Mr. Morrissey said he began working on the project about 14 months ago after a conversation with Mark Arney, the chief executive officer of the NWPB. The fruits of his labor -- and those of Buddy Leger of Leger & Sons, who helped recruit Sen. Saxby Chambliss (R-GA) to sponsor the legislation -- are about to be realized. Mr. Morrissey told those in attendance that the proclamation was unanimously accepted by the Senate last June and a presidential proclamation was "ready to go" and would be signed two weeks after the House of Representatives passes its resolution.

"It opens up all kinds of doors for promotions, from the local business level to our chapters to the NWA and the NWPB," Mr. Morrissey said of the proclamation. "It needs to be all-encompassing, and everyone needs to come together and help promote it. The month of July is the highest production month that we have, and it made the most sense to do that month. Hopefully we can positively affect not only increasing consumer demand in purchases, but also positively increasing the price back to our member companies because it also tends to be the lowest month for pricing."

Mr. Morrissey noted that the NWA started partnership incentive programs with a couple of its members, CHEP Equipment Pooling Systems and Sakata Seeds America Inc., that provide "huge benefits" for the association.

"We're trying to build new revenue streams for the NWA and are continuing to look outside the box," he said. "My ultimate goal for this association is to provide solutions to your business needs through expanded and new member services. I refuse to stay consistent on anything. If we stay consistent, we should expect indifferent results - actually we should expect deteriorating results."

Mr. Morrissey had some good news and some bad news for the audience about its regional chapters, which now number nine nationwide. While the Missouri-Arkansas chapter closed due to a lack of members, the California-Arizona chapter had been reorganized as



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the Western Watermelon Association and now was comprised of 10 western states and half of Mexico, he announced.

Mr. Morrissey said that his goals for the future of the NWA include "continued and progressive growth of the convention" in attendance, education, networking among member companies and fellowship among its members.

"The number one priority focus is food safety, and we'll continue to do that until the cows come home," Mr. Morrissey said. "We either have to protect ourselves or have the federal government tell us how to protect ourselves -- and if they do it, we won't be able to afford it.

"My dream is that as we add new member services, prioritizations and expansions, we will get farmers, shippers and other suppliers that work in our industry that are not members to seek us out," he added.

Mr. Morrissey continued, "I know that our watermelon family is very strong. It still amazes me that you can put aside your competitive juices and you can become comrades and you can enjoy each others' company and do the things that benefit your association and I applaud you for it."

The NWPB's presentation, which for the first time was primarily on video, detailed the various initiatives it had implemented during 2007 and several it was planning for 2008. Perhaps the most important was its new crisis communications program, whose highlights included training its board members in crisis communications, sending out over 30,000 safe-handling cards for consumers, and creating crisis tip cards and brochures that contain information guiding industry members through media interviews and how to handle possible crisis situations at their operations.

The NWPB had a partnership with Weight Watchers' "Pick of the Season" during the third quarter of 2007 that promoted watermelons across the continent. It was the second time that Weight Watchers invited watermelon to be its "Pick," the only commodity to ever have this honor.

During May and June, the NWPB will have a 90-second commercial segment on in-flight entertainment on Continental Airlines flights in the United States and overseas that it expects will be seen by some 3 million passengers.

It is also working on a new smaller booth for trade shows that will both maximize impact and make it easier to store, as well as a new watermelon marketplace Internet web site.

Other convention highlights

Convention attendees were updated on the progress -- or lack thereof -- on the 2007 farm bill during the opening general session and breakfast Feb. 22 by Rep. Jo Bonner (R-AL), whose district includes the county the convention was held in. Autumn Veazey, director of legislative affairs and associate counsel for the United Fresh Produce Association in Washington, DC, also addressed the audience.

While the congressman was not upbeat about the chances of the farm bill's passage this year, he believes its passage was necessary because food is a national security issue. "We know what it's like to be dependent for oil and gas - it's not fun and not cheap," he said. "We can't be more dependent on other countries; it would be unconscionable to allow that to happen."

Ms. Veazey was more positive about the bill, and said that "very high-level negotiations were going on as we speak, even though Congress is not in session. There is a lot of money for the industry in this bill for the first time in 70 years, and I am very confident that the money for specialty crops will remain in the bill."

The NWA's annual auction of fresh watermelons and watermelon-themed memorabilia, the convention's signature event that raises the

majority of its operating funds for the year as well as monies for NWA-sponsored watermelon research, took place Feb. 22. This year's auction brought in over \$566,665, a record and up \$29,000 from 2007. The 65 donated tractortrailer loads of watermelon from NWA members and its regional chapters were a big factor for the success of the auction.

As in years past, the bidding at the auction was fierce.

Will Hales, vice president of Salisbury, MD-based Hales Farms Inc. told The Produce News after he placed his winning bid on a truckload of 45-count melons that he "believed in doing everything possible to help the association promote the watermelon industry. The growers and shippers that donate these loads believe in what the association is doing as a whole. Everyone here is very willing to participate."

Larry Hilliard, a regional produce buyer for Wal-Mart Supercenter's McCarran, NV, distribution center, told The Produce News that having the opportunity to come to this national event was very important to him.

"I'm glad to get the opportunity to meet the growers, to see who we buy from and to answer questions they may have," Mr. Hilliard said.

Bradley O'Neal, president of Coosaw Farms of Fairfax, SC, ended his term as NWA president at the NWA's closing session on Feb. 24 and handed over the gavel to Nowell Borders, president of Borders Melon Co. Inc. Brent Harrison, president of Al Harrison Co., was selected as the NWA's new second vice president, and John Lapide, secretary-treasurer of Brooklyn, NY-based Melon 1, moved up from second to first vice president.

Mr. Borders told The Produce News Feb. 24 that during his presidency he would work for "change, and change for the better. I've seen a lot of positive change over the years, and change is good as long as it is positive. I hope to work well with the National Watermelon Promotion Board. We want to have a food-safety protocol put together for 2008 and want to push a labor bill through the House and Senate so we can at least have agricultural workers available."

Mr. Morrissey told The Produce News Feb. 24 that he was already looking forward to next year's convention at the Francis Marion Hotel in Charleston, SC, and would be announcing details about it in the next two months.

"We are projecting at least a 10 percent increase in attendance and a 50 percent increase in exhibit space," Mr. Morrissey said, attributing the increases in large part to the timing of the Southeast Produce Council's Southern Exposure conference and trade show, which will not conflict with the NWA convention in 2009, as it has for the past several years.