

EPC welcomes NJDA and state's new secretary of agriculture

By GORDON M. HOCHBERG

TEANECK, NJ — The membership of the Eastern Produce Council came out in force Tuesday evening, June 2, to welcome New Jersey's new secretary of agriculture, Douglas H. Fisher, and to hear reports on various aspects of the 2009 Jersey deal.

EPC President Dean Holmquist of Foodtown Inc. welcomed everyone to the council's last meeting before its traditional summer break, and noted that the evening's host organizations — the New Jersey Department of Agriculture — sponsored its first EPC meeting back in 1987.

Secretary Fisher told the audience that he had been a supermarket owner for 30 years, declaring, "I love the industry," then quickly intro-

duced three speakers to give crop updates on some of the major Jersey items.

John Rigolizzo of the Vegetable Growers Association of New Jersey was first up, saying that he was "looking forward to an exciting season" for his state's wide-ranging list of fresh vegetables.

The season on some items was "running a little early," and growers were looking at "good quantities of some greens." He added that "quality for this time of year is excellent." Sweet corn, one of the state's more popular items, "will be on time," he stated.

Before he gave his update on peaches, Phil Neary of Sunny Valley International

announced that the New Jersey Peach Council had dedicated its 2009 peach guide to Al Murray, the state's assistant secre-

tary of agriculture.

On the peaches themselves, Mr. Neary said that the "crop looks very good" and that "expectations were very high at this time." There was "one frosty night" a while back but it did not do any real damage; in fact, "it did only a little natural thinning."

The state is expecting "95 percent of a peach crop" at this time, he said. There should be some "light volume" around mid-July, with heavy volume in August and September, he said — a fairly normal scenario. Nectarines should also start in mid-July with heavy volume to follow.

Tim Wetherbee of Diamond Blueberry Inc. and chairman of the New Jersey Blueberry Industry Advisory Council cautioned that the start of the season was "two weeks out from

harvest," so giving precise numbers about volume and start times was a little like "picking the lottery."

Nevertheless, he said that the state would probably see a 53-million pound crop in 2009, similar to last season's crop, with perhaps 45 million pounds going to the fresh market and about 8 million pounds going to processing. The Hammonton and surrounding area saw a "cool and wet spring," he said, "and the berries continue to size." He expected harvest to start "on or about June 15."

Mr. Wetherbee said that the council "expanded its radio campaign" to promote blueberries in the East this year. The program will run for five weeks starting in mid-June in nine cities: New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Washington,

Pittsburgh, Buffalo, NY, Cincinnati, Cleveland and Harrisburg, PA.

Secretary Fisher concluded the presentation by noting that despite severe proposed budget cuts in the state that have hurt the popular and widely respected Jersey Fresh promotional program, "we do have an ample supply of point-of-purchase materials" still available to help promote the crops.

"I feel honored to follow in the footsteps of Art Brown (who was at the meeting) and Charlie Kuperus," the state's two immediate past secretaries of agriculture, said Mr. Fisher. He asked the many growers, shippers, brokers, wholesalers and retailers from up and down the Garden State to stand and be recognized, and concluded, "We are here to service your needs."



Bill Walker of the New Jersey Department of Agriculture with Mike Gallagher of Foodtown Inc.



At the head table were (top) Tim Wetherbee of Diamond Blueberry Inc., John Rigolizzo of the Vegetable Growers Association of New Jersey and EPC Vice President Paul Kneeland of Kings Super Markets, and (seated) Phil Neary of Sunny Valley International, New Jersey Secretary of Agriculture Douglas Fisher and EPC President Dean Holmquist of Foodtown Inc.



Howie Farber of Nathel & Nathel, Paul Auerbach of Maurice A. Auerbach Inc. and Thomas Krulder, a past president of the council.



Robert Von Rohr, Bonnie Lundblad and Phil Neary, all from Sunny Valley International.



Jason Stemm of Lewis & Neale Inc. with Logan Brown of the New Jersey Department of Agriculture.



Kurt Zuhlke of Kurt Zuhlke & Associates with Jeff Beach of the New Jersey Department of Agriculture.