

**For Immediate Release**

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**2019 SE Regional Conference Event Helps Producers Move Forward**

The 2019 SE Regional Fruit and Vegetable Conference welcomed more than 3,400 members of the fruit and vegetable industry to Savannah for its annual event.

“We are pleased with the continued attendance for this event,” said Aries Haygood, President of the Georgia Fruit & Vegetable Growers Association. “After a year like we had in 2018, it is encouraging to see our growers come to Savannah and start their year with more education and more resources, ready to move forward from a really hard year.”

The conference, coordinated and sponsored by the Georgia Fruit & Vegetable Growers Association (GFVGA) and the South Carolina Peach Council, was held across three days at the Savannah International Trade and Convention Center. From Thursday through Saturday afternoon, SE Regional offered 13 different commodity and production sessions totaling more than 70 hours of education. Session topics included specific commodities like blueberries, blackberries, raspberries, Muscadines, peaches, strawberries and vegetables, and also vital operation topics like business operations, food safety, roadside markets and organic production.

Beth Oleson, GFVGA Director of Education and Food Safety, said conference educational coordinators continue to bring top tier speakers to each session based on relevant needs of the industry. “These land-grant extension and research state specialists work to create applicable educational conferences that address specific issues on the farm and in packing facilities.”

The SE Regional conference continues to be such a gathering place for produce industry growers that allied organizations often co-locate their meetings during this event. This year, those included the Produce Safety Alliance Grower Training Course, and the North American Raspberry and Blackberry Association (NARBA) Annual conference. “Having allied organizations co-locating at SE Regional provides great opportunities to extend the educational experience for attendees outside of production and handling issues, business operations and food safety” Oleson said.

The Produce Safety Alliance Grower Training course satisfied the FSMA Produce Safety Rule requirement 112.22(c) that requires *‘At least one supervisor or responsible party for your farm must have successfully completed food safety training at least equivalent to that received under standardized curriculum recognized as adequate by the Food and Drug Administration.’*

“Food safety continues to be a very overwhelming topic to growers, packers and shippers,” Oleson said. “They have to consider buyer requirements, audit requirements and now requirements coming out of the Food Safety Modernization Act and Rules. We must be sure we take advantage of growers’ time

here in Savannah to provide relevant, needed training. Being able to partner with the Produce Safety Alliance allows us to address a regulatory need affecting the whole industry,” Oleson said.

Other commodity session speakers included specialists and top researchers from the University of Georgia, North Carolina State University, University of Florida and several others.

Special guests in attendance included U.S. Representative for District 1 Buddy Carter, R-GA, and State Commissioners of Agriculture Gary Black (Georgia) and Hugh Weathers (South Carolina).

In addition to education, industry leaders were recognized at the annual Awards Breakfast. Those recognized included:

- Joe Watson, South Carolina Peach Grower at Jerrold A. Watson & Sons, Mr. Peach Award
- Dr. Timothy Coolong, Associate Professor of Horticulture for the University of Georgia, Donnie H. Morris Award for Excellence in Extension
- Shane Curry, Agricultural Extension Agent in Appling County, Great American Publishing’s Fruit + Vegetable 40 Under 40 Award
- Bhabesh Dutta, UGA Assistant Professor of Vegetable Pathology, Great American Publishing’s Fruit + Vegetable 40 Under 40 Award
- Drew Echols, co-owner of Jaemor Farms, Great American Publishing’s Fruit + Vegetable 40 Under 40 Award
- Beth Oleson, GFVGA Director of Education and Food Safety, Great American Publishing’s Fruit + Vegetable 40 Under 40 Award
- Troy Bland, Chief of Operations at Bland Farms, Produce Business Magazine’s 40 Under 40
- Lauren Dees, Sales and Marketing Manager at Generation Farms, Produce Business Magazine’s 40 Under 40
- Brandon Parker, Sales Manager for Shuman Produce, Produce Business Magazine’s 40 Under 40
- Natalie Adan, Georgia Department of Agriculture Food Safety Division Director, Elliot O. Grosvenor Food Safety Award

The 2020 SE Regional event will be held once again in Savannah, Ga. next January 9-12.

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**The Georgia Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association** is a trade association representing farmers, packers and shippers producing fruits and vegetables in the southeastern United States. The organization provides a viable and united voice to represent the industry. Through support for educational programs, agricultural research, member services and marketing activities GFVGA encourages efficient, cost effective production for growers and increased consumption by consumers.

GFVGA is managed by Association Services Group, a professional management firm with offices in Atlanta and LaGrange, GA, and is accredited by the Association Management Company Institute.

**The South Carolina Peach Council** is an association of growers, packers, researchers, allied industry, and produce buyers who seek to protect and advance the production and marketing of peaches in South Carolina.