

Florida and the Fresh Strawberry Industry

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The Florida strawberry industry harvested 6,900 acres of strawberries in 2002; this ranks second to California's 28,500 acres (USDA-NASS 2003). This research is designed to examine four key issues influencing the Florida fresh strawberry growers' competitive production and marketing position.

Two Key Issues Facing the Production of Florida Strawberries

Strawberries are grown in Florida on raised beds covered with plastic. These beds are fumigated by methyl bromide during the pre-planting stages. The U.S Clean Air Act of 1992, as amended in 1998, requires that methyl bromide be phased out of use by 2005. Elimination of this will have a significant impact on the competitive situation for strawberry production (Van Sickle and NaLampang 2002).

Florida strawberries are planted mainly as bare rootstock of varieties specifically designed for growing conditions in Florida. The rootstock is propagated from "mother plants" grown in California. The mother plants produce sister plants that are then moved to northern states to begin the growing process and develop hardiness. These sister plants are then brought to Florida, reducing the chance of disease. The bare root is transplanted by hand, and the plants are watered daily for two weeks to keep them cool. This extensive watering is costly in terms of water access and nutrient loss in the soil. This issue is compounded by a major potential conflict in water usage between Tampa urban sprawl and agricultural usage.

Two Key Issues Facing the Marketing of Florida Strawberries

In a recent survey of produce buyers, food safety was ranked as the third most important challenge

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facing the retail industry (Heller 2002). Consumer awareness of food safety issues is reshaping the retail food-supply chain. The National Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs) program was developed in 1999 to educate growers and packers of fresh produce about how they can reduce the potential for microbial contamination. GAPs use a HACCP-like approach to address on-farm food-safety issues for fresh produce through a set of practices developed by USDA that a grower may voluntarily adopt. In contrast, third-party certification schemes, developed by private food safety companies, involve mandatory adoption of practices in order to achieve certification as "safe." Recently, many retailers began demanding certification of handling practices from their fresh produce suppliers. Private certifiers inspect farms and provide consultation on how to reduce the likelihood of microbial contamination, for a fee (Henson and Caswell 1999). The additional costs associated with GAPs and/or third-party certification may exclude some small growers from the market and further accelerate the trend toward a bi-modal structure (large versus small) for the Florida fresh strawberry industry.

Florida is the largest supplier of strawberries during the winter months (October-January). However, consumers "are slow to recognize the availability of strawberries" during this period (Best 2002). Marketing for strawberries often occurs at the end of the Florida strawberry push; marketing them earlier would allow Florida to have higher returns. If marketed differently there may be an opportunity for Florida growers to sell more berries.

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