

**How Do Imported Strawberries from Mexico Affect
Hillsborough County Agriculture?**

June 12, 2013



Florida

Course of Instruction:

Strawberry Crest High School is located in eastern Hillsborough County in the heart of the strawberry production industry. The school has been in existence for three years and offers courses in Natural Resources and Environmental Science, Agricultural Communication, Agritechnology, and Veterinary Assisting. The school's facilities include a land laboratory, of which one-acre is used for strawberry production. A labor intensive crop, students complete approximately 75% of the picking, packaging, and marketing of the strawberries. Members of the school's FFA Alumni chapter provide farm labor for all spraying, laying soil beds, planting, harvesting, and packaging when students do not have enough time to complete those activities due to curriculum requirements. Students in the Environmental Resources course, along with the Agriscience Foundations and Agritechnology courses, have been studying the impact of the foreign competition on the local strawberry industry in Hillsborough County.

Why is the issue important now?

The 2012-13 strawberry season produced a bumper crop of Plant City's most famous fruit. This was good news for consumers, but not necessarily for farmers. Because of the varying production cycles of the many varieties of strawberries, farmers select varieties that bear fruit at various points throughout the December-March season. This ensures prime quality strawberries throughout the season and protects against a glut of inferior berries that lower market price. In normal years this method of production works very well. However, this year's warm winter caused varieties to produce both earlier and longer, which led to an abundance of plump, flavorful strawberries, decreasing the value of this year's crop. Producers have gotten used to the fact that a good year for crops often means lower prices. But, this year producers in our area faced another threat: strawberries from Central Mexico. A record number of strawberries were imported into the U. S. this winter – some of which were sold right in the heart of Florida's strawberry production industry. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, through Jan. 28, 2013, Mexico imported 20% more strawberries than during the same period a year before, which also was a record-setting year. Even more disturbing, in January, imported strawberries from Mexico appeared on the shelves of the local Walmart store, only minutes away from the prime production area of strawberries in Hillsborough County. After repeated years of financial struggles due to weather and disease, the local strawberry farmers were finally feeling that this might be the year to be profitable.

What is the nature of the issue?

The selling of foreign strawberries in the Plant City Walmart caused an uproar in the agriculture community of Plant City. Walmart bought imported strawberries from Mexico during the peak of the winter strawberry season from a secondhand marketer – at a time when strawberry farms in the area had coolers and fields full of strawberries (Campbell, 2013). The Hillsborough County economy is driven by the production and selling of strawberries. Therefore, the local economy was negatively affected by the selling of the foreign strawberries. Local farmers were feeding berries to livestock due to retailers purchasing foreign strawberries (Sapp, 2013).

Who was involved in the issue?

The most obvious groups involved in this issue are the strawberry farmers and Walmart. However, the issue touches so many more – including every citizen and consumer of Hillsborough County. Strawberry imports largely affect the Hillsborough County economy by not only affecting the farmers, but also by causing a ripple effect among the 15,000 farm workers and approximately 50,000 Americans employed by the strawberry industry, in areas such as transportation, boxing, pallets, packaging, labeling, refrigeration services and repair, irrigation equipment, hardware, agricultural chemicals and pesticides, and the list goes on. Due to these imports, many farmers go out of business each and every season, bringing down the Hillsborough County economy with them. Strawberry imports not only affect the agricultural community but also affect the automobile industry, fuel companies, grocery stores, department stores, and rental facilities. Many people and businesses are largely affected by the foreign strawberry imports and, if strawberries face a halt in their production, ultimately the Plant City strawberry industry will collapse along with the many dollars generated by its internationally known celebration: the Florida Strawberry Festival. According to Guan (2013), the economic dependency of the small community of Plant City on the strawberry industry cannot be overstated.

How can the issue be defined?

Agriculture is a vital issue to Hillsborough County. Though farmland only makes up 34% of the county, in 2011 agriculture added \$832 million dollars in economic impact to Hillsborough County's economy. Each year, strawberries grown in Hillsborough County make up 47% of the County's agriculture sales, which translate into \$388 million dollars annually going into the local economy. They also account for 90% of all winter grown

strawberries produced by Florida. However, in 2011, local grocery stores in Hillsborough County began importing foreign grown strawberries during the peak of Florida strawberry season. These strawberries posed a threat to local growers' economic stability and to overall economics of Hillsborough County (The City of Plant City Government, 2013).

What is the historical background of the issue?

Plant City, Florida, is known as the Winter Strawberry Capitol of the World. Approximately 8,800 acres of the labor and resource intensive crop are grown locally, generating an economic impact on the community exceeding \$700 million. Local citizens also use the strawberry industry as an identifier when describing their geographical heritage, because Plant City and strawberries are synonymous. However, the importation of strawberries has increase 19% from last year. Likewise, 74% of Mexico's exports enter the U.S. between December and April, which directly encroaches on Florida's marketing window. Unfortunately, imported strawberries from Mexico are driven by American companies, primarily by large companies which, due to expensive land and labor costs in the U.S., can produce strawberries cheaper in foreign countries (Campbell, 2013).

What caused the issue?

Imported crops regularly compete on an equal basis with those that are domestically produced. These crops are often marketed by brokers alongside American grown crops. When an order is placed, brokers often fill the order with the product on hand, with little or no knowledge of the impact of the sale on a local community. Likewise, companies that use brokers are often unaware of the commodity's country of origin, even though each package is supposed to be labeled with that information. In addition, orders are often filled with products from several sources, making it difficult for the recipient of the product to know beforehand where the product originated. For example, the manager of the Plant City Walmart placed the foreign strawberries on the shelves, not even realizing that "*Product of Mexico*" was on the label. At the same time, the company that produced the berries – Driscoll's Berry Company – which sells California, Mexico, and Florida strawberries, never sells to Walmart – nor does Walmart buy from Driscoll's. Instead, a broker buys berries from Driscoll's, then sells and ships those berries around the country. "We typically only bring non-Florida berries into Florida when demand increases beyond the supply of local growers," wrote a Wal-Mart spokesperson in an email to a local newspaper, *The Ledger*. "Additionally, we have supported our Florida growers this season by sourcing hundreds of thousands of cases of Florida-grown strawberries for Walmart stores in 15 other states" (Bouffard, 2013). However, the Florida Strawberry Growers Association (FSGA) maintains that Walmart is not doing enough to help local farmers, even though the retailer says it's planning to boost sales of U.S. products over the next decade (Shopes, 2013).

What are the risks?

The importation of foreign grown produce threatens both the economic security and way of life for Plant City farmers and residents. Markets can become easily flooded with foreign produce and Florida growers have no outlets in which to sell their products. Likewise, Mexico's climate and season are nearly identical to Florida's and their production is nearly 2.5 times that of Florida's (Driscoll, 2013). Labor cost in foreign countries is also cheaper, allowing for agricultural products grown in Mexico to be sold in American markets for less money. This presents a risk to the local economy since local farmers depend on adequate strawberry sales to survive. At the same time, foreign producers are not dealing with the same governmental regulations that American farmers do, including regulations on labor and food safety (Guan, 2013).

What are the benefits?

Many people believe that there are benefits on both sides of this issue, such as a cheaper product for the consumer, increased availability year-around, increased profits for corporations, and more choice in brands and varieties of produce. Due to cheaper labor, materials, and more lenient regulations based on the country of origin, American producers with facilities in Mexico benefit by importing their products to the U.S.

Is there strong disagreement on how the issue should be solved?

On one side of the issue, proponents believe that foreign imports will be detrimental to the survival of strawberry farmers in Plant City. There is also the belief that the timing of the imports constitutes a "dumping" of foreign products in order to drive U.S. producers out of business. Producers would like to see the anti-dumping laws that were enacted for the tomato industry also implemented for strawberry crops. On the other side of the issue, some believe that the free market should prevail. They believe that if food prices are cheap, everyone wins. They also note that all companies selling foodstuff to U.S. consumers should follow U.S. food safety guidelines, even if operating in a foreign country. It is also noted that food labeling allows consumers to make a choice between imported and domestically produced commodities. However, the FSGA questions the impact of food labels, noting that they are often illegible for foreign-grown products.

References

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Strawberry Crest FFA 2013 Agricultural Issues Team

Farm & Ranch News

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Florida's \$1 Billion Strawberry Industry Seriously Threatened by Mexico

By Stephanie Farmer



This is an ordinary group of people standing in Carl Groome. This is a group of government officials with Congressman Dennis Ross in the far right and others in the group. Senator Marco Rubio, Congressman Rusty Cline, Senator Bill Nelson, Senator Tim Lee, Representative Ben Blackburn, UF researchers and growers who want to help the industry.

David Spivey with Spivey Farms told me that if solutions are not found within the next year or two then the 30-acre (which is average size of a strawberry farm) will have to close. He is not the only grower sadly shaking his head with this information. Take a moment and talk to Carl Groome and other strawberry growers.

USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack visited the industry during the Florida Strawberry Festival. As I spoke with him about this issue, he sadly shook his head and said, "This is just like what happened to Florida's tomato growers years ago." He was referring to when NAFTA first took place and Florida became flooded with Mexican tomatoes, shutting down about 80% of Florida's tomato growers in less than 12 months.

"If we do not find solutions to help the Florida strawberry industry, the Florida blueberry industry will be next." This is because Mexico is expanding

and Insights from a Comprehensive Industry Survey. Dr. Gao's survey shows 65 percent of the respondents believe the industry will continue to go down when asked where the industry is going in the next 3 years.

The fear is well founded: the Mexican strawberry acreage jumped dramatically recently, from 17,000 acres in 2010 to 20,000 in 2012 and 25,000 in 2013. The situation will further deteriorate in the coming years, so far there is no evidence that suggests Mexican acreage is going to stop increasing any time soon.

What is surprising is who is buying Mexican land and expanding production at a rate of 20 to 30% annually. It is mostly large California companies, some of whom have nationally recognized names whom consumers recognize as originally being exclusive American farmers. Consumers purchase their products, thinking they are helping the American farmer. But, that is no longer always

Another tough season for Plant City strawberry farmers

Growers faced heat, competition and labor shortage in 2012-13

By Dave Nicholson
Plant City Courier

PLANT CITY — If last year was one for the books, this year was one for the struggle. Growers faced heat, competition and labor shortage in 2012-13.

They also competed with imports from Mexico, which again had a bumper crop.

There is a shortage of laborers and "it was a tough 8 months," said Ted Long, head, executive director of the Florida Strawberry Growers Association.

Plant City area growers produced an estimated 25 million boxes of fruit last season.

2012-13 was the best year in the past 10 years, the growers said. The harvest was good, the weather was good, and the local growers did well.

"It wasn't the best year, and it wasn't the worst year," Gary Whitaker, member of the Florida Strawberry Growers Association, said.

Long said that due to weather, in the past year, the harvest was not as good as it was in 2012-13.

"It wasn't the best year, and it wasn't the worst year," said Gary



new strawberry variety, the experimental variety, which was the first time a new variety was grown in the area.

Long said that due to weather, in the past year, the harvest was not as good as it was in 2012-13.

"It wasn't the best year, and it wasn't the worst year," said Gary



Plant City Chamber of Commerce forum on April 22, 2013 at 3:00 PM



Plant City Rotary Club forum on June 3, 2013 at 6:00 PM



Unexpected Imported Strawberries Upset Area Growers at Difficult Time



Strawberries from Mexico upset local growers when they appeared in the Plant City Walmart. Usually, berries from outside Florida are brought in only when demand exceeds supply, a spokeswoman said, but this was an exception.

By Kevin Bouffard
THE LEDGER
Published: Monday, February 4, 2013 at 2:51 a.m.
Last Modified: Monday, February 4, 2013 at 2:51 a.m.

PLANT CITY | The Florida Strawberry Growers Association is seeing red.

The Walmart in Plant City offered imported Mexican strawberries until a recent backlash by members of the Strawberry Growers Association.



Strawberry Crest High School community forum on June 4, 2013 at 6:00PM



Plant City Lions Club forum on
April 30, 2013 at 12:00PM



Florida Strawberry Growers Association
forum on April 23, 2013 at 4:00 PM

Date	Presentation of Ag Issue Forum:	Location	No. Present
4/22/13 3:00PM	Plant City Chamber of Commerce	Chamber of Commerce Board Room Plant City, FL	5
4/23/13 4:00PM	Florida Strawberry Growers Association	Florida Strawberry Growers Association Office, Dover, FL	7
4/23/13 6:00 PM	Strawberry Crest FFA Alumni	First Choice Barbeque, Plant City, FL	25
4/30/13 12:00PM	Plant City Lions Club	Buddy Freddy's Restaurant Meeting Room, Plant City, FL	20
4/30/13 4:30PM	University of Florida Collegiate FFA	IFAS Gulf Coast Research and Education Center-Plant City Campus, Plant City, FL	11
5/13/13 6:00PM	Hillsborough County Farm Bureau Board Meeting	Hillsborough Co Farm Bureau Community Room, Valrico, FL	43
6/3/13 6:00PM	Plant City Rotary Club	Trinkle Building Ballroom, Plant City, FL	64
6/4/13 6:00PM	Strawberry Crest Community Performance Plant City Kiwanis Club	Strawberry Crest High School Auditorium Dover, FL	32
6/5/13 12:30PM	Plant City Kiwanis Club	Buddy Freddy's Restaurant Meeting Room, Plant City, FL	21



University of Florida Collegiate
FFA forum on
April 30, 2013 at 4:30PM



Strawberry Crest
FFA Alumni
forum on
April 23, 2013
6:00 PM



HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY FARM BUREAU

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May 13, 2013

TO: Strawberry Crest FFA Chapter

FM: Judi Whitson, Executive Director

RE: May Board Meeting

We are pleased that the Strawberry Crest FFA Chapter presented their forum at the board meeting in May, on "Ag-Issues and Concerns". The issue of foreign strawberries is very important to the Hillsborough County Farm Bureau along with the Florida and American Farm Bureau Association.

We had 20 board members and 23 guests whom attended our May meeting, and we enjoyed hearing their presentation. The Farm Bureau is glad that Strawberry Crest FFA has become involved in a very important issue to our local community.

The meeting was held at the Hillsborough County Farm Bureau building on Mulrennan Rd in Valrico, Florida.

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Dale McClellan, President; Michelle Williamson, Vice-President; Jemy Hinton, Treasurer; George Coleman, Secretary; Glenn Harrell, Member-at-large; Danny Aprile, Bill Burnette, Dennis Carlton, Amanda Collins, Shawn Crocker, Roy Davis, Jim Dyer, David Drawdy, Alvin Futch, Stefan Kazaras, Greg Lehman, Carl Little, Caesar Rinaldi, Leslie Laroque Turgeau, Ron Wetherington
Executive Director; Judi Whitson



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TO: Susan Mayo, Advisor
Strawberry Crest FFA

FROM: Jim Dyer, UF-Plant City Collegiate FFA

DATE: May 3, 2013

RE: Ag Issues Presentation at CFFA Meeting

On behalf of the UF-Plant City Collegiate FFA Chapter I would like to thank you and your Agricultural Issues team for presenting information concerning the importation of foreign strawberries into our community. It was obvious from our members' responses that they had no idea that strawberries were being brought in from Mexico into our community where a high percentage of farmers' livelihoods are obtained from the production of that product. It was also beneficial for our members to see your students present both sides of the issue. In fact, after your team left, our members stayed around for almost two hours discussing the issue among themselves.

In attendance at the meeting were 11 individuals who aspire to be Agriscience teachers and/or who are involved in this and other related issues in our community. It was very beneficial for those individuals to see and understand how an Ag Issues team is organized and prepared. Especially impressive was the degree to which students have assumed ownership of their roles in the presentation. It was obvious that the students have prepared for their presentation and had identified with the person they were portraying.

Thank you once again for bringing your students to our monthly meeting. Good luck to you and to the team members as you present this important topic as part of the Ag Issues Career Development Event.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "James B. Dyer".

James Dyer, Professor and Advisor
UF-Plant City Collegiate FFA



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April 22, 2013

Susan Mayo
Strawberry Crest High School

Re: FFA presentation of Mexican Strawberries/Plant City Issue

Susan:

I would like to thank you for including the Plant City Chamber of Commerce staff as one of the five groups to preview the Speech Competition team as they prepare for the formal competition in June. The students did a wonderful job on their first presentation and as I mentioned afterwards, we would love to hear the final version prior to the contest.

This is the fourth or fifth time we have been able to assist you with this project and we certainly hope you will keep us on the list.

Sincerely,

Marion Smith
President



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Plant City ... The Right Place ~ The Right Time ~ The Right Choice





Susan Mayo
Strawberry Crest FFA

RE: June 3, 2013

Thank you for willing to present the Strawberry Crest FFA team's Ag Issue again for us this year. The Strawberry Crest FFA Ag Issue team presented during the June meeting. The meeting was held at the Carabba's Restaurant in Plant City, FL next to I-4 off the Thonotosassa Road exit. We met at 12:00PM and we concluded by 1:05PM. Your team presented a very interesting topic relating to the economic impact of foreign produced strawberries. Many of our members have been impacted by this issue this past year. We had 64 members in attendance per month.

Thank you,

Jon Poppell

Jon Poppell
Program Chairman



STRAWBERRY CREST FFA ALUMNI

4691 Gallagher Rd
Dover, FL 33527

Contact:
james.p.killebrew@gmail.com

To whom it may concern,

On April 23, 2013, the Strawberry Crest FFA Agriculture Issue Team presented their issue of the Mexican Berries Importation. The presentation was very impressive and the Alumni members learned a lot about this issue. The questions the Alumni members were able to ask allowed them to understand the issue in better detail.

The Strawberry Crest FFA Alumni watched the presentation on April 23, 2013 at 6:30 pm at the First Choice BarBQ restaurant in Plant City, FL. There were 25 members and guest present at the April SCHS FFA Alumni meeting.



Dear Strawberry Crest FFA,

Thank you for bringing the Strawberry Crest FFA Agricultural Issues team to our board meeting on April 23, 2013. The board meeting was held at four in the afternoon at the Florida Strawberry Grower's Association conference center located at 13138 Lewis Gallagher Rd, Dover, FL 33527. The forum on the issue of importing strawberries in the Plant city area was executed well and I hope that we, as the Florida Strawberry Grower's Association, were able to provide insight to help the team prepare for the upcoming State Contest. The seven board members present, including myself, were all very impressed with the quality of speaking and the depth of research that the students showed in their presentation. I hope that the team performs well and takes the information we provided them to better enhance their forum.

Thank you,

Ted Campbell

Executive Director



P. O. BOX 1059
PLANT CITY, FLORIDA 33564-1059

May, 7, 2013

Susan Mayo

Strawberry Crest High School
Career & Technical Department Head
Agriculture & Natural Resources Educator
4691 Gallagher Road
Dover, FL 33527

Dear, Mrs. Mayo:

Thanks so much for bringing your students to our noon lunch meeting on Tuesday, April 30, 2013. Your program on Imported Strawberries and the affect on Hillsborough County, was very informative. All 31 members in attendance that day were impressed with the knowledge of your students. Thanks so much for taking the time to join us for lunch, and share valuable information with us as well.

Sincerely,

Lion Brian West

Club Secretary