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Texas produce industry recognizes nine strong leaders

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MCALLEN, TX -- There are nine new members of the Texas Produce Hall of Fame.

An estimated 500 members of the Texas International Produce Association gathered on a perfect spring-like evening at the McAllen Country Club on Jan. 29 to recognize long-time leaders and contributors to the industry.

Then known as the Texas Citrus & Vegetable Association, the group first launched its hall of fame in 1988. The group has since inducted new members on even years.

Seven industry members were added to the hall and two supporting-industry leaders received the Scott Toothaker Award, which was launched in 1989.

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A solid theme throughout the presentation reflected south Texas' difficult times facing freezes and hurricanes over the last 35 years. The extraordinary events started with several consecutive days under 20 degrees in 1983, which decimated the Texas citrus industry. The industry rebuilt after that to be frozen again in 1989. Still, Texas' citrus growers again fought to reclaim their groves.

In one of the light moments of the Hall of Fame ceremony, inductee Mark Fryer, a citrus grower, remarked that football coaches urge their players to dig deep in the fourth quarter of games, reminding them they worked all season to be so strong, so they could dig deep for late-game strength. "I feel like I've been in the fourth quarter since 1983," Fryer quipped. He added that Texas' citrus industry turned around after four hurricanes devastated Florida's citrus crop in 2004. A subsequent supply gap finally gave Texas growers requisite strong markets to climb back in the citrus game. The industry has since flourished, Fryer added.

Those challenges that would have caused many others to quit were the cornerstone of what was an emotional and insightful evening as the industry honored those who overcame. The 2018 Hall of Fame class widely credited prayer and God's blessing as a key ingredient for their strength in overcoming immense and ongoing adversity.

Jud Flowers, who started working in the produce industry in 1977, described the people who had taught him lessons for success that enabled him to build Lone Star Citrus Growers since he started it in Mission, TX, in 2007.

Citrus grower Joe Metz, was inducted for a career that included leadership in the application of technology. He was among the first to use micro jet sprinkler systems, which allowed him to save his crop in the 1989 freeze. Metz noted that he was old enough to remember 1952 and 1962 freezes.

Coming from the vegetable side of this industry were four Hall of Fame inductees, all are descendants of Carl and Wilma Schuster, whose farms evolved into Rio Fresh Inc. in San Juan, TX. These were Bill and Christine Morley, Jeanette Schuster and Fred Schuster.

Fred Schuster observed: "A farmer is the first thing God created when he made this Earth."

The Scott Toothaker Award recipients were Mary McKeever and Hugh Topper.

McKeever was recognized for her citrus industry work, beginning with joining TexaSweat Citrus Marketing in 1973. By 1980 she became the general manager, which was a position she held for 17

years. She was credited for her brilliant innovations to sustain the framework to promote Texas citrus despite years when there was little or no production. McKeever is retired and lives in Texas' "hill country" north of San Antonio.

Recently retired retail produce executive Hugh Topper worked in Texas for Fleming Foods for 10 years before he joined H-E-B in 1991. He eventually became vice president of produce for the Texas chain.

Like many of the 2018 Texas Produce Hall of Fame inductees, Topper is well-known for his leadership on many national, as well as state, organizations.

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