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South Carolina touts locally grown program

May 13, 2020



Agriculture is the number one industry of South Carolina, and with a 23 percent growth rate over the last decade it is clearly a main driver of the economy. The latest statistics, which are a couple of years old, show that it has an annual economic impact of more than \$41 billion and accounts for about 70,000 direct jobs statewide.

State officials like to say that agricultural production is as important to the state's future as it has been to its past. One way in which the state celebrates and encourages that is through its Certified

South Carolina program, which brands and promote the state's production to in-state and regional retailers and food marketers.

Two members of the South Carolina Department of Agriculture — Communications Director Eva Moore and Director of Marketing Katie Pfeiffer — recently discussed the Certified SC program and other efforts of the state to enhance its top industry. Of course, South Carolina peaches are well known, but the state has several specialty crops that deserve attention including berries, brassicas, leafy greens, melons, and even a state-of-the-art hydroponic lettuce growing operation.

Moore revealed that Certified SC was started in 2006 and encompasses all of the state's agriculture including livestock, cotton and field crops, and peanuts. "The Certified SC brand is well known throughout the state," said Moore. "A recent survey showed it had 80 percent recognition statewide."

While it is utilized throughout the year for one crop or another, it is surely most visible from May through the summer when the state's fresh fruit and vegetable production is at its peak. The fresh South Carolina peach, available from mid-May to mid-September, is an item that SCDA loves to brand with its state of origin because of its perceived superior flavor. "There is no comparison between a Western and an Eastern peach," boasted Pfeiffer. "The Brix in our peaches just make them taste so much better."

Moore said the Certified SC program is a partnership between producers and the state. Packers that join the effort can utilize the brand on their packaging and the state conducts promotion programs and develops point of purchase material and other in-store merchandising aids to tout the local production. There is also a Fresh on the Menu program that encourages restaurants to feature products produced in the Palmetto state.

Pfeiffer said the Certified South Carolina brand is promoted at regional and national trade shows and the SCDA also holds its own in-state show bringing local buyers and sellers together. Moore noted that this year's event was held in March, before the sheltering-in-place orders made that type of gathering impossible for the time being. She said the event was very well received by both sides of the buy-sell equation.

Pfeiffer said this type of effort is in perfect sync with SCDA's marketing mission of "connecting the dots" between those two end points. She said the department's marketing team tries to identify market and consumer trends and inform producers of those trends.

On the consumer end, she added that SCDA is always looking for new ways to promote Certified SC and this year the program expects to utilize social media platforms to a greater extent. That will especially be true as they work through the impacts of coronavirus. Social media communications, rather than face-to-face promotions, may clearly be necessary. Moore said currently SCDA is trying to identify the Fresh from the Menu restaurants that are offering takeout, which it can then promote.

Another area in which SCDA has a robust program is in the food safety arena. Moore said the food safety and compliance department ensures that foods are produced, manufactured and marketed under safe and sanitary conditions. The state utilizes routine surveillance programs to assure compliance. She also noted that South Carolina has kept its agricultural producers up to date on the new Food Safety Modernization Act provisions including the new Produce Safety Rule. She added that while larger operations already have to be in compliance, the smallest farms have until 2021. SCDA is endeavoring to communicate this information to farms throughout the state.

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