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NEPC 2022 expo draws great crowd and widespread praise

By

Gordon M. Hochberg, editor emeritus

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BOSTON — The [New England Produce Council](#) drew a sizeable and energetic crowd to its 2022 expo, held here Aug. 24-25. And those at the expo — sponsors, exhibitors, attendees and NEPC executives — really liked what they saw.

As one exhibitor said on the show floor, "This is probably the best NEPC show that I've attended in my many years of coming."

The NEPC Produce, Floral & Food Service Expo 2022 took place at the Omni Boston Hotel at the Seaport, a new venue for the council's 22nd annual show.

Two receptions took place Wednesday evening, Aug. 24: the VIP Reception, followed by the Cocktail Reception. "The opening receptions were very well attended, and the food was excellent," NEPC Executive Director Laura Sullivan said late Friday afternoon, Aug. 26. "Thank you to 4M Fruit Distributors for sponsoring the Cocktail Reception and also to Coast to Coast Produce and North Bay Produce for co-sponsoring the VIP Reception."



Blake Bolden

(center) a former hockey player with the National Women's Hockey League, who has broken barriers since she was a young girl, delivered the keynote speech Thursday, Aug. 25, at the New England Produce Council's expo. She is shown with NEPC

President Tom Murray and NEPC Executive Director Laura Sullivan.

The Educational Breakfast Panel Session at 7:45 a.m. opened Thursday's events, as speakers addressed the topic, "How to Minimize your Produce Supply Chain Challenges."

The expo took place from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., then closed for an hour so that everyone could enjoy the keynote luncheon. NEPC President Tom Murray of Roche Bros. addressed the luncheon crowd, and announced a number of scholarships. Blake Bolden, a former hockey player with the National Women's Hockey League, who has broken barriers since she was a young girl, delivered the keynote speech.

The expo re-opened at 2 p.m. and concluded at 4 p.m.

The show had 140 produce and floral exhibitors from across the country and beyond, and there was a wait list, according to Sullivan. "We had great attendance," she said, estimating that about 800 people were at the event.

Asked what she thought the highlights of the event were, she replied, "First of all, the exhibits. The floral display when you entered the show was so inviting, so colorful, so fragrant — just a spectacular way to enter the show. And then to walk into all of the beautiful products that our produce exhibitors displayed. They all worked tirelessly in a short amount of time to put their booths together. I was very impressed with their efforts into making the show what it was."

Asked about the one-hour break during the expo, which was a first for the council, Sullivan said, "It seemed to work well. It gave an opportunity for exhibitors to take a break for an hour and be able to hear the keynote address. It gave everyone a break to get off their feet and listen to an inspiring presentation from Blake Bolden, and then go back to the expo and finish up."

The Produce News spoke to a number of exhibitors during the show to hear what they had to say.

Joe Atchison III of the New Jersey Department of Agriculture said, "This has been a really great show. The last couple of years have been a little different [because of the pandemic], but this year everybody's back. It's exciting to see so many people. There are a lot of new faces, and we're happy to meet them in person. And we've had some great conversations. We're seeing a lot of good-quality traffic, the aisles are crowded, and everybody's excited to be here."

Atchison noted that the New England market "is the second-largest market outside of our immediate tri-state area in New Jersey, so it's essential that we maintain a presence here. We know that so many of these retailers buy from our Jersey farms, and we're here to make sure that they continue to see the great quality that Jersey Fresh provides."

He concluded, "This is probably the best NEPC show that I've attended in my many years of coming. We're very energized about being out again."

Bonnie Lundblad of Sunny Valley International said, "The show is going well. I like the venue that's just a little bit more compact because it allows everybody to be closer together, and I feel that everyone is able to make it up and down the rows and visit everyone. I've heard a lot of people saying that they appreciate the fact that everything is within one complex this year."

Asked about the traffic, she said, "I am seeing a lot of retailers. Before the break for lunch, there were

several that came over, and then I've seen even more afterwards. Everyone is definitely making an effort to go down every row and hit every booth."

She added, "The cocktail party was great; there was lots of energy there. And I just think that there's a lot of energy in this building right now."

At the Sunny Valley booth, she noted that "right now we're highlighting our New Jersey peaches, which we're done shipping in the next two weeks. And also our blueberry program — we're finished from New Jersey, and we're starting our imports right now. From now until March, we're in the blueberry business from South America."

Bruce Klein of Maurice A. Auerbach Inc., which has been at the NEPC expo since it began, said, "The show is going great. It's probably the best show we've had in a long time. The opening party was very good, and the attendance was amazing. Just a great networking experience."

Regarding the traffic on the show floor, he said, "The representation from all the New England retailers is here. The traffic has been very good. It's a quarter to three now, and there are still a lot of people in the aisles. So that's a good sign."

Tim Harrington of Stemilt Growers was seeing "terrific traffic" and said that "everybody is very engaged. They're really inquiring about what's new out there, what the new season looks like. It's exciting to see lots of great New England retailers here. Today we're featuring our organic peaches as well as our new Rave apple — a combination of a Honeycrisp and a MonArk."

The NEPC show represents "a great chance to see all our key partners as well as produce managers and my fellow suppliers," he stated. "If you're not here, you're missing an opportunity."

Brandon Parker of Shuman Farms said, "Laura and her team, and Tom, do a great job putting this show on. There's a good concentration of retailers in this market, and we are just fortunate and blessed to work with a number of these retail partners, and to see them and discuss the upcoming change of seasons as we transition out of the Vidalia season and into the Peru season. So the timing is good for this show that we're able to discuss that transition and talk about the fall and winter marketing programs that we have coming up, and also to discuss how we've expanded our Peruvian organic program."

Asked about the crowds of people walking the show floor, he stated, "The traffic has been good so far. We had a little break for lunch and it's still busy. There are a number of really good retailers and decision-makers who are here, so it's been a good thing to see them and discuss the promotions we have coming up."

He added, "I would highly recommend this show. The timing is good. It seems like people were ready to get out from being in the pandemic mode. So people were excited to get out and see some new items and new things going on in the produce world."

Finally, NEPC President Tom Murray offered his thoughts on the entire event.

"Being here at the Omni Boston Hotel at the Seaport has been excellent," he said. "Laura Sullivan has done a great job of putting everything together. Last night we had a great cocktail hour. Today we had a great morning education session, talking about deliveries, trucking situations, ports, all the issues that all the retailers and brokers are having right now."

He continued, "Today we had an inspirational speech from Blake Bolden. She did a wonderful job." Regarding the expo, Murray said, "Speaking with all the vendors, they are very happy with the traffic. All the retailers are here. There's time to talk to people and share new ideas."

And as the country continues to pull away from the pandemic, Murray stated, "This year it feels like the show is much more back to normal than last year. We have had a good influx of floral booths, which really brightens up the whole show. That's helped create a lot of interest. And it's great to see everybody you haven't seen in a while."

[Gordon Hochberg](#)

About Gordon M. Hochberg |

Gordon M. Hochberg was born in New York City, and grew up in Westchester County, NY. He earned a bachelor of arts degree in history from Lafayette College in 1973.

He started his career at The Produce News in the late 1970s, and has been with the publication ever since.

He served on the Board of Trustees of the New Jersey Agricultural Society from 2012 to 2018. He currently serves on the Southeast Produce Council's Board of Governors.

He enjoys music, theater and reading (American and ancient history are his favorites). And he's been a lifelong fan of the New York Yankees since attending his first game in the late 1950s. He and his wife, Kathi, have been married since 1974.

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