VIDALIA ONION COMMITTEE MEETING

The Vidalia Onion Committee (VOC) met on January 19th. Among the items considered was the election of new committee members. John Shuman was elected as Chairman, Michael Hively as Vice-Chair, and Danny Ray as Secretary/Treasurer.

Bo Herndon, the former Chair, announced that the Commissioner of Agriculture has pledged $250,000.00 to the VOC for promotion and advertising. This will give the VOC the opportunity to leverage a tremendous amount of visibility in the marketplace. Among the campaigns planned for this season is with Weight Watchers, which will highlight Vidalia onions as part of their diet program.

This is the first year that Wendy Brannen, the new VOC manager, is coordinating the Vidalia Onion Banquet, which is scheduled for Saturday February 25th. She hopes this will be a great opportunity for growers and others to interact on a social level.

They have decided on a new compliance officer with William ‘Bill’ Brady. This is to replace Bob Stafford who now works for the Vidalia Onion Business Council, the political arm of the Vidalia growers.

The growers are looking forward to a highly successful year. With their financial troubles behind them and additional funds from the Georgia Department of Agriculture it should be a highly successful year.

LABOR ISSUES RESURFACE

Onion production is a highly labor intensive undertaking and many growers have noticed a shortage of labor this year, which although not serious is still of some concern. This shortage is attributed to the hurricanes that hit the gulf states. It is believed that many agricultural workers that would have been in the Vidalia area are working in the gulf states hit by hurricanes where they can earn more money. Along with this, there has been growing political pressure to control the southern US border more completely. There is an estimated 11,000,000 undocumented workers in the US. The H2A guest worker program has been problematic for growers because of the relatively high cost and risk associated with it.

On January 24, 2006 a meeting was held at the courthouse in Lyons. This was to discuss the situation with the H2A program and an opportunity to make changes that would be of benefit to growers. Sherry Sparks, who worked for the Ga. Labor Dept. for many years,
was there to give an assessment of the current situation as well as to discuss a new bill sponsored by Senator Saxby Chambliss. To quote from the handout:

“This bill addresses agricultural workforce concerns and illegal immigration issues within the agriculture/agribusiness industry by streamlining and expanding the existing H2A program, providing a one-time transition period for unauthorized workers to obtain legal, temporary nonimmigrant status and creating a program modeled on the existing H2A program for agricultural workers and employers within daily commuting distance of the border.”

The meeting was to get the word out about this new bill and to generate support. Growers and others were encouraged to contact their representatives to support this bill. With the increased concern with border security, many feel this may the best opportunity to bring about change in the program that would be more favorable to growers.

FROM MY DESK

The onions look particularly good at the Vidalia Farm and most of the experiments are proceeding as planned. I do have one late fertility experiment with polymer coated fertilizer that will be installed next week. There continues to be concern about the IYSV virus with many samples testing positive, but with inconsistent symptomology. The variety trial is smaller than last year’s 49 entries, but is still sizeable with 42 entries.

Regards,

<<<<<<<<<<<
George Boyhan, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Extension Horticulturist-Vegetables
Dept. of Horticulture
University of Georgia
Southeast Georgia Extension Center
PO Box 8112
Nessmith-Lane Bldg. 2nd Flr.
Statesboro, GA 30460
(912) 681-5639 Office
(912) 681-0376 FAX
(912) 682-3481 Mobile
gboyhan@uga.edu
<<<<<<<<<<<