



Watermelon UPDATE

NATIONAL WATERMELON PROMOTION BOARD

Commodity Roundtable

NWPB Executive Director Mark Arney Meets with Group to Identify Best Practices



William Watson (L), who manages The Commodity Roundtable is pictured above with NWPB Executive Director Mark Arney (R) looking over the agenda for the group's meeting on April 9, 2019, in Orlando, Florida. Arney is a past chairman of the Commodity Roundtable. The Commodity Roundtable is an informal group comprised mostly of Chief Executive Officers and Executive Directors of agriculture promotion groups who share information to help their organizations achieve efficient and effective program implementation. This group comes together periodically to discuss and develop best practices in the areas of finance, administration, marketing and research. Members of the group represent avocados, softwood lumber, peanuts, olives, pecans, cherries, mushrooms, beef, lamb, pork, honey, popcorn, eggs, soybeans, sorghum, almonds, mangos, paper and packaging, cranberries, dairy, cotton and potatoes.

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Reaching Foodservice Dietitians with Watermelon

The NWPB foodservice program works to reach decision-makers throughout the foodservice industry. Foodservice dietitians have proven their value with increased menu transparency and legislative oversight in regards to menu items. To reach foodservice dietitians, the NWPB sponsored the National Restaurant Association Nutrition Executive Study Group with more than 30 operator dietitians including representation from Panera Bread, Darden, Culver's, Brinker, and more. The night before the event kicked off, the Board hosted dietitians from four large national chains for a dinner where watermelon was showcased on the menu. It was a fun and relaxing way to kick off the conference and get to know some of the attendees. As with most sponsorships, the NWPB had a table with watermelon information, provided recipe cards and a melon baller in the welcome bags and the NWPB web logo was present throughout the event. Two watermelon salads were served to show watermelon's versatility - one with fresh and one with grilled watermelon. The highlight of the event was Jesse Wiggins, NWPB President, participating on a grower panel. Jesse discussed his history with and love for the watermelon industry, how watermelon is sustainably grown, and his favorite ways to eat the whole watermelon. Additionally, he highlighted that watermelon is available year-round and discussed many of its health attributes. Follow-up is ongoing.



Queen Training



The weekend of April 13-14, NWPB hosted the annual queen media training and communications seminar in Atlanta, GA. The “watermelon boot camp” kicked off with an introduction to watermelon and a walk through a training binder of resources, then to an etiquette session from Erika Preval of Charm Etiquette. Next was a half-day session on storytelling and media interview prep with Gallo Communications. The session ended with former national queen Carla Penney teaching the girls exactly how to be a watermelon queen. After completing the event, we firmly feel everyone is set up for a successful season of promoting watermelon! Good luck and have fun, ladies!

CPMA



NWPB was present at the Canadian Produce Marketing Association's annual convention April 3 – 4 in Montreal. The event provides a unique forum for industry leaders to enhance their business opportunities in Canada through an exceptional combination of education and networking opportunities. CPMA's Annual Convention and Trade Show attracts over 3,000 participants from all segments of the produce supply chain and showcases produce from around the world. Exhibiting at the CPMA gives NWPB the opportunity to connect with retailers from all over Canada. With staff in attendance, NWPB was able to coordinate in-store promotions. This not only encourages watermelon consumption as a whole, but also supports our Market Access Programs* in place to support US watermelon exports.

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Viva Fresh Expo



NWPB was on-hand for the 5th year as exhibitors at Viva Fresh expo in San Antonio, Texas from April 26 – 27. This event is hosted by the Texas International Produce Association (TIPA) and highlights the "Gateway to the Americas," showcasing produce grown in the southwestern U.S. and Mexico. The sold out event hosted more than 327 buyers from virtually all chain stores in North America and attracted over 4,000 attendees. NWPB's Juliemar Rosado and Stephanie Barlow were joined by NWPB President Jesse Wiggins. The expo included educational seminars and the expo hall provided the ability to meet with high profile buyers, retailers and foodservice industry professionals that were in attendance throughout the weekend. The show was a success for exhibitors and attendees and will return to San Antonio in 2020.

The Sequencing and Assembly of the Principle American Watermelon Cultivar ‘Charleston Gray’ is Complete

Watermelon is an important fruit crop throughout the world and provides a rich source of health-promoting compounds. Nearly six percent of all land used for growing produce is planted with watermelon with an annual global production of 117 million tons in 2016. Watermelon is commercially grown in 44 states in the United States with the highest production in Georgia, Florida, Texas, California and Arizona.

Watermelon has a long history in the United States and a large number of watermelon cultivars have been developed in the US since the mid-19th century. The watermelon cultivar ‘Charleston Gray’ was developed and released to the public in 1954 by Charles Fredric Andrus, a horticulturist at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Agricultural Research Service’s (ARS), Vegetable Breeding Laboratory (known today as the USDA/ARS, U.S. Vegetable Laboratory) in Charleston, South Carolina. ‘Charleston Gray’ is resistant to several major diseases of watermelon, produces high yields in a wide range of geographical regions, and handles long-distance shipping with little damage. ‘Charleston Gray’ has been used in numerous breeding programs for development of improved watermelon cultivars throughout the world. The recent advancements in genomic technologies have enabled sequencing and assembly of many plant genomes, and opened new opportunities in utilizing molecular tools in plant genetics and breeding. Unlocking the ‘Charleston Gray’ genome will facilitate the identification of valuable genes for utilization in breeding programs for improvement of watermelon cultivars.

The USDA/ARS, U.S. National Plant Germplasm System (NPGS) maintains a large collection of watermelon accessions, known as United States Plant Introductions (PIs), collected over many years from different geographic regions in Africa, and throughout the world. The U.S. watermelon PIs exhibit great physical and genetic diversity, and thus represent a valuable resource for discovery of unique qualities useful for improving nutritional contents and resistance to biotic and abiotic stresses in watermelon cultivars. Elucidating the genetic diversity and relationships among the watermelon PIs is an important step that precedes the identification of genes associated with beneficial attributes.

In this study, scientists at the USDA/ARS, U.S. Vegetable Laboratory have initiated collaborations with scientists at the Boyce Thompson Institute (Cornell University) on assembly of the principal American watermelon cultivar ‘Charleston Gray’ genome, and with scientists in several other universities, including North Carolina State University, Michigan State University, and West Virginia State University on evaluating genetic diversity of the USDA watermelon PI collection. The scientists employed the most advanced genomic technologies to sequence the ‘Charleston Gray’ genome, as well as 1,365 additional watermelon lines from the NPGS. They were able to identify genes that confer disease resistance and genes controlling several important fruit quality traits that exist in wild watermelon, but were lost during the many years of domestication and development of modern watermelon cultivars.

The ‘Charleston Gray’ genome data are made available to the public on the Cucurbit Genomic Data Base (<http://cucurbitgenomics.org>) and can be used by researchers and plant breeders interested in improving watermelon for resistance to a wide range of diseases and pests, and for health-promoting compounds.

The study was supported by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Agricultural Research Service (ARS) and by USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture Specialty Crop Research Initiative (Grant # 2015-51181-24285) supporting the Cucurbit Cooperative Agricultural Project (**CucCAP**) “**Leveraging Applied Genomics to Increase Disease Resistance in Cucurbit Crops**” <https://cuccap.org>. Also, by grants from the National Watermelon Promotion Board (NWPB) and National Watermelon Association (NWA).

**The National Watermelon Promotion Board is an equal opportunity provider and employer.*

First FoodOvation Was a Success for NWPB

To reach culinary contacts with national and regional chains the Board invested in an event called FoodOvation. FoodOvation is a “quality over quantity” event where the Board reaches operators through 35 minute, one-on-one meetings. The FoodOvation in Bluffton, SC, in March included 14 meetings with chains such as Applebees, B.Good, Sodexo and more. One of the benefits of this event is the ability to control the invitation list and invite operators we want to work with. Next is the ability to have quality, focused and customized meetings with national and regional chains. The meetings consisted of a flavor pairing exercise, where Chef Dave Woolley guided the chefs through a

tasting of watermelon juice, rind, sprouted seeds and fresh paired with multiple flavors with a customized focus on what would make sense on their menus. Pairings ranged from basil pesto to Tajin to furikake. Other elements included company recognition on the event’s website, a free advertisement in the event brochure, giveaway in the welcome bag and hours of networking after the meetings to really build a relationship with the operators. Follow-up is ongoing and the NWPB will sponsor more FoodOvations in 2019.



Winter Consumer Research

Each year the NWPB conducts consumer research to better understand consumer’s attitudes and usage of watermelon. The studies are used to measure success as well as build programs. With the rise of fall/winter volumes the NWPB has conducted a fall/winter survey in addition to the spring/summer survey to measure for any differences. The 2019 Winter Consumer Research was fielded in March. There were very few differences in the summer versus winter data with many data points being the same or trending similarly. Watermelon’s ranking for taste, freshness, value, health and safety remain strong. “Juicy” rose to the top as the word most associated with watermelon. “Quality” was the only variable where the responses increased – meaning quality is perceived to be better in the summer than in the winter. “Taste” was the quality issue cited most, however at 35%, this is still not a major concern. The NWPB will conduct a summer survey in August 2019 and another winter survey around the same time in 2020.

Cooper River Bridge Run

The first Saturday in April, NWPB staff traveled to Charleston, SC to help pass out a truckload of watermelon to runners, family and fans at the Cooper River Bridge Run. With 40,000 participants, this is the 3rd largest 10K in the country. NWPB joined queens and coordinators from South Carolina, North Carolina, Georgia, Gulf Coast, Illiana, MarDel and the National Association.



In addition to day-of sampling of fresh-cut watermelon, NWPB created banner ads displayed through the local TV affiliate promoting *Watermelon Fuels Athletes* and *Watermelon.org*, which ran from March 24th to April 6th and delivered over 225K impressions.



Child Nutrition Conference

A first-time event for NWPB, we exhibited at the Child Nutrition Conference in Chicago, Illinois. It is the **premier national** conference for the Child and Adult Care Food Program community and home of the USDA requested Summer Food Program training. This event reaches 1,800 professionals who make nutritional and culinary decisions for children at locations from in-school to daycare. The National Child and Adult Food Care Program Association hosts this annual conference. NWPB sampled watermelon rind pickles and the watermelon yogurt mint smoothie, both CACFP certified.



Where
will
NWPB
be next?

West Coast Produce Expo – Palm Desert, CA – May 9 & 10

National Restaurant Association – Chicago, IL – May 19 - 21

Today's Dietitian Spring Symposium – Scottsdale, AZ – May 19 - 22