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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**Florida strawberry growers host area chefs during harvest**

PLANT CITY/DOVER, FLA—The Florida Strawberry Growers Association is encouraging chefs and restaurant managers to serve more Florida strawberries more often. This initiative supports the national movement by many chefs and foodservice distributors to buy local whenever possible.

To reinforce the goal, the Association hosted a small group of Florida-based chefs on a harvest tour through strawberry fields, farms, cooling and shipping facilities in Hillsborough County, Florida - an area known as the Strawberry Capital of the World.

Mike Lott, a strawberry grower since 1979, Brian Gilbert, facility manager of Dover Fresh Produce and Frank and Sam Lombardi executives at C&D Produce gave chefs an over view of the industry from planting, picking, packing, cooling, shipping, sales and marketing during a whirlwind exploration of Florida strawberry production.

Florida and other states east of the Mississippi are prime markets for Florida-grown strawberries due to their close proximity to the growing area. Less travel means delivery of product fresh and fast to foodservice outlets and retailers.

“Meeting executive chefs, research and product development chefs and chef instructors who are teaching in accredited culinary academies is the best way possible to spread the word about our scrumptious strawberries and to increase demand by restaurants and mass-feeding outlets, said Sue Harrell, director of marketing for the Florida Strawberry Growers Association.

“We’re focusing on educating seasoned chefs and the chefs of tomorrow about our industry from the farm to the table. Establishing and nurturing these valuable relationships is an important program that will help maintain and develop new markets for our berries,” Harrell continued.

The hands-on experience in the fields and with the farmers was well received by the culinary professionals attending the tour.

“After seeing the Florida strawberry industry, firsthand, I am more anxious than ever to incorporate our state’s strawberries in product development assignments as part of my current and future menu and product development services,” said Chef Sandy Gibilisco, one of the chefs on the tour.

Florida strawberries are in the marketplace from December through March or April each year. Many chefs and consumers are unaware that Florida is the dominant supplier of domestic strawberries during the winter season.