

Annual conference on co-ops promotes support, involvement

August 22, 2007

The Florida Council of Cooperatives' 28th annual Conference on Cooperatives brought more than 70 young members of Florida co-ops to Sarasota, August 10-12, to learn more about member-owned, member-managed, non profit cooperatives that help them stretch their dollars and provide them with needed goods and services.

"Our primary goal is to get younger members of co-ops together to gain a better understanding of the advantages co-ops provide, and to encourage them to get involved in helping manage and direct their co-ops," says David Bridges, FCC president and senior vice president for Farm Credit of Southwest Florida in Arcadia. The FCC currently represents ___ co-ops incorporated under Florida's State Statutes, and government services supporting co-op members.

Member-owned, member governed cooperatives exist solely to serve their members, and return any surplus revenues (income over expenses and investment) to their members, proportionate to their members' use of the cooperative. According to the National Cooperative Business Association, U.S. cooperatives serve some 120 million members, or 4 in 10 Americans. Cooperatives operate in every industry including agriculture, childcare, energy, financial services, farm supplies, energy, food retailing and distribution, health care, insurance, housing, purchasing and shared services, and telecommunications.

More than 50 members of Florida co-ops attended the 2007 FCC conference, many sponsored by their co-op. A number of attendees are members of the Farm Bureau's Young Farmer/Rancher program. Participants included row farmers, citrus growers, dairymen, and ag teachers and 4-H agents. Four Brooksville High School students also attended with their teacher as winners of the FCC's annual "Cooperative in the Classroom" award. It is the third consecutive year that this school's Future Farmers of America's (FFA) team has won this award, led by teacher-advisor Rick Aherns.

Conference presenters included representatives from Florida Citrus Mutual of Lakeland and Florida's Natural Growers of Lake Wales, which serve citrus growers; Farmers Cooperative in Live Oak, a supply co-op; the Florida Electric Cooperatives Association, based in Tallahassee, which represents 17 electric co-ops; and the president of Florida Farm Bureau, John Hoblick. State Representatives Doug Holder and Baxter Troutman told attendees the importance of keeping their elected officials informed of their needs and concerns. Dan Mahan, a vice president for agribusiness for the Bank for Cooperatives in St. Louis, told attendees the main difference between CoBank and commercial banks is that, "we pay our borrowers, not stockholders."

The FCC's mission is to promote and support cooperative businesses in Florida. The Council currently is completing a new Cooperative Curriculum keyed to the Florida state requirements that should be available for distribution to middle and high school ag instructors next fall. That project is led by FCC board member Al Wysocki, an assistant professor at the University of Florida.

The Council's 2008 Conference on Cooperative is set for (date, 2008) at the Sarasota Hyatt. For more information visit the FCC's web site at <http://www.flcoop.coop/>.