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APRIL 15, 2010

**Florida Specialties Receives Economic Assistance**



On Tuesday the Board of Collier County Commissioners approved economic development assistance for Florida Specialties, a grower, packer, shipper and broker of quality fresh produce. The assistance will enable the company to expand its operations in Immokalee, continue its product innovation, and create stable employment opportunities in the eastern Collier County town.

Founded more than 25 years ago, Florida Specialties grows much of its product but also conducts farm management, packing, cooling, sales and shipping for many other agriculture companies in the region. Fresh produce is shipped across the United States and Canada and is found in many national chain and fresh market grocery stores. The company is located on Main Street East in the designated Immokalee Enterprise Zone.

In 2009, the assets of Florida Specialties were acquired by new ownership who desired to expand the operations by creating a new product label called Blue Ribbon Beans. The initial plan involves packaging fresh "trimmed" green beans into microwaveable bags to be sold in the fresh produce section of grocery stores and to food service distributors nationwide. This expansion will result in 25 new jobs and \$1.5 million in new equipment.

"The jobs that are being created will provide an opportunity for out-of-work farm workers and others in the industry to begin working in an environment that will allow for greater stability and skill upgrades," said Jim Coletta, Collier County Commissioner, District 5. "This is just the type of innovation we should be encouraging in Immokalee."

With the Assistance of the Economic Development Council of Collier County, Florida Specialties is participating in the Economic Stimulus Program, which will assist them in investing in broadband and video technology that will enable product buyers to log into a system and view their respective orders as they are being processed.

Florida Specialties is the first fresh produce company in Immokalee that will do the final "value-added" processing in-house rather than shipping the produce outside of the area for final packaging. By doing so, the company will improve employment opportunities and create jobs that should be full-time and not subject to the seasonality of the area.

"Many of these new positions involve skilled or professional labor due to the complexity of the computerized processing equipment and distribution channels," said Ron Bailey, Jr., CPA, on behalf of Florida Specialties. "The demand for the new product should also stimulate employment within the company's farming and packinghouse operations."

The Public/Private Partnership for Economic Development between the Board of Collier County Commissioners and the EDC supports innovation and entrepreneurialism leading to the expansion of existing businesses through a wide variety of programs. Florida Specialties was assisted by EDC Business Relationship Manager Brooke Gabrielsen.

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