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Vegetable and Fruit Improvement Center roundtable debates produce consumption

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AUSTIN, Texas — It's not often the research community hears it straight from the front lines.

Representatives from retail, foodservice, food banks and processing industries were on hand for a roundtable discussion at the Vegetable and Fruit Improvement Center's biennial conference on Aug 21.

The conference was in conjunction with the Texas Produce Convention.

About 140 people attended the conference, said Bhimu Patil, VFIC director and professor of agriculture food chemistry at Texas A&M University in College Station.

"This conference was unique because it was focused mostly toward consumers and stakeholders," Patil said. "My goal was to make sure scientific research reaches to the consumer through conferences like this so people can eat more fruits and vegetables."

Patil said another feature of the conference was that it included a wide spectrum of people who all are involved in increasing consumption of fruits and vegetables, from dietitians, growers, nutritionists, scientists, students and lawmakers.

Panelists included Hugh Topper, group vice president of produce and floral for San Antonio-based H.E. Butt Co., Gary Huddleston, director of public affairs for Cincinnati-based Kroger Co., Chris Romano, regional director of produce and floral for Whole Foods Market Inc., Richie Jackson, executive director of the Texas Restaurant Association, Dave Gombas, senior vice president of food safety and technology for the United Fresh Produce Association, Washington D.C., and John Kreger, president of the Houston Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Association.

Roundtable moderator John Sauve of the Swardlick Marketing Group posed the question, "What can we as an industry, from producers all the way up the pipeline, work on and devote our efforts to increase the impact of the health story of fruits and vegetables?"

Nutrition is one of the most successful pieces of the produce puzzle, Topper said.

"Nutrition for us as a retailer is one of the easiest sells," he said.

More information and education is needed, however.

"They have an overall feeling of fruits and vegetables being good for you but we need to break it down for them," he said.

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