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MDOC harvests 20,000 pounds of blueberries and passes audit to sell to outside markets

JACKSON – The Mississippi Department of Corrections has harvested 20,000 pounds of blueberries and recently received certification to sell to outside markets, including schools, retail stores, and farmers markets.

The blueberry farm at South Mississippi Correctional Institution (SMCI) in Leakesville passed an audit by the Mississippi Department of Agriculture in conjunction with the U.S. Department of Agriculture on June 8.

“Although being GAP (Good Agricultural Practices) certified is not mandatory, most buyers will not accept any type of produce, if a farm is not certified,” said Roger Davis, director of Food Services and Agriculture Enterprises for the MDOC. “Being certified gives the USDA an avenue to trace where each produce item that is sold to the public came from, down to the time, day, and field it was harvested and processed. This helps with any recalls on fresh produce.”

The blueberry orchard was started at SMCI in 2006 as a way to address inmate idleness and to teach inmates a trade skill in the blueberry industry. The blueberries help reduce food cost and serve as a healthier menu option. They also can be a cash crop, but not without GAP certification.

This year’s crop, harvested using 30 inmates and three staffers, is the most in several years, because of available staff and inmates. Last year, 15,300 pounds were harvested.

The blueberries are just one of the crops from the Agriculture Enterprise, which is one of 11 legislatively approved programs at the MDOC. The program, which includes farming and leasing, uses no general fund dollars. In calendar year 2017, soybeans, vegetables, pecans, and blueberries generated about \$1.1 million, and \$1.8 million came from land leases.

“Farming is still very much a part of Mississippi’s makeup, especially in the Delta,” Commissioner Pelicia E. Hall said. “Therefore, we are helping inmates obtain transferrable skills. At the same time, we are growing healthy food products and generating funds from sales.”

Davis said he envisions increasing the number of pounds of blueberries, but the orchard first must undergo major pruning in August and, therefore, will produce fewer pounds during the 2019 harvest season. “But we should rebound with an increase in weight going forward,” he said.