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## Ag chief hails local company

By: Dan Heath

Keeseville – One local company recently received its own slice of the (apple) pie. New York State Agriculture Commissioner Nathan Rudgers was in Keeseville Wednesday taking a tour of Champlain Valley Specialty. The apple-slice Producing/packaging plant recently received an order for 1,000 cases of sliced apples for New York City schools.

The order came through the Department of Defense Fresh Program, Which began in the mid-90's as the military Was downsizing.

“The Department of Defense recognized it had the purchasing power and ability to do the logistics of buying locally and getting those products into schools,” Rudgers said.

The 2002 Farm Bill provided \$50 million annually to the Defense Department's Fresh Program, and allocated up to \$3.2 million of that money to New York State in both 2003 and 2004. That same year, New York State enacted the Farm-to-School Law, leading to the formation of its Farm to School Coordinating Committee.

“That left us with the challenge and opportunity to find appealing, locally produced products that kids like to eat and to make a connection between our farm producers, packagers and schools,” Rudgers said. “It's a win-win-win situation.”

Last year, the Fresh Program provided \$1.7 million worth of fresh fruits and vegetables to New York City schools, 85 percent of which consisted of New York-produced apples, apple slices and pears.

Champlain Valley Specialty employs eight people, with plans to grow in the upcoming year. Co-owner Jeremy Dygert said that along with the five-pound bulk packages and the 2.8-ounce school packs, it hopes to start packaging eight-ounce packages for the retail market.

The company invested in a \$93,000 packaging unit capable of packing and sealing up to 20 bags a minute to meet the Fresh Program contract.

“We got this machine since we started the school program,” Dygert said. “We recently bought another set of scales. We should be able to double capacity within three weeks.”

Bill Jordan, the agricultural commissioner's special assistant of farm and school orders, said the Department of Defense toured Champlain Valley Specialty on Nov. 22 and immediately ordered 1,000 cases of apple slices, each case holding 100 2.8-ounce individual servings.

“Those are the kind of orders that get a machine paid for,” Jordan said.



New York Apple Association's Core Report spokesman and editor Peter Gregg said consumer demand for apples is on the rise.

"Apple growers and producers are enjoying a renaissance. Over the past three-four years, there is a lot of new scientific research proving eating an apple a day does keep the doctor away," Gregg said. "That message is out to consumers and as a result, demand is on the rise. This is good news for the local economy."

Peter Forrence of Forrence Orchards said the key to the program is it increases consumption of apples.

"It is all the rage in this country," he said, noting that even fast-food chains such as McDonalds are offering apple slices as an alternative to French fries in some meals.

Donald "Tre" Green III of Chazy Orchards agreed, adding that "with all the health benefits of eating apples, everybody should be a winner."

He said two studies have linked apple consumption and Alzheimer's prevention, while others have linked the fruit to colon-cancer prevention.

Town of Chesterfield Supervisor Gerald Morrow said Champlain Valley Specialty, which began processing in May, has made good on its promises.

"They did what they set forth to do. They have taken an old barn and turned it into an agricultural-production business employing local people," he said.

Rudgers said the program is an example of what can happen when local, state and federal government entities work together. He suggested using it as a model for other programs.

"Let's see if we can't grow this kind of an idea," he said.