Commissioner of Agriculture Charlie Bronson presented a dozen plaques to several strawberry growers, some container nursery operations and a tropical fish farmer at the first Tampa Bay area C.A.R.E.S. recognition ceremony in Plant City. C.A.R.E.S. is the acronym for County Alliance for Responsible Environmental Stewardship, a program spearheaded by the Florida Farm Bureau to honor farmers who provide outstanding protection and management of Florida’s sensitive environment. The Commissioner was very familiar with some of the recipients, as they were recognized over the years as winners of the Department’s Environmental Stewardship recognition.

Five of the recipients were berry and vegetable growers. All five farms are also participants in the Florida Department of Agriculture’s Water Quality/Water Quantity Best Management Practices (BMP) program and therefore have the honor of a presumption of compliance with Florida water quality regulations. Florida’s strawberry industry is “the poster child” of the BMP program, with most of the industry utilizing almost all prescribed practices.

The first farm receiving an award was Florida Pacific Farms of Dover, Florida. Florida Pacific expanded into Florida from California about 12 years ago and brought John Stickles along to manage their Florida operations. Florida Pacific grows strawberries, blueberries, various vegetables. Always looking for ways to broaden their market basket, they have even tried Florida-grown raspberries and blackberries. John Stickles was one of the first farms in the area to try the H-2A guestworker program for their farm labor and they still use this program today. They also were one of the first to enroll in the Global Gap (Good Agricultural Practices) food safety program. Florida Pacific uses all of the

Florida Commissioner of Agriculture awards the CARES certificates at the Hillsborough County Farm Bureau annual meeting in Plant City, FL [Photo by Jemmy Hinton.]

John actively supports his industry, cooperating with UF/IFAS in several research projects, serving on the Hillsborough County Farm Bureau Board of Directors and assisting his fellow farmers whenever possible.

The second vegetable farm to receive recognition is G&F Farms. G&F is owned by Glen and Frances Williamson. The pair began farming while still in high school in 1952 on land that has been in the family since the 1880s. The Williamsons started from humble beginnings and over time expanded their farming operations to their current 350 or so acres of strawberries and vegetables.

The Williamsons believe that the key to a sustainable farming is to protect the land and natural resources surrounding that land. The farm uses drip irrigation, GPS technology and integrated pest management to reduce pesticide use and saving costs. They have extensive tailwater recovery systems, utilizing captured stormwater for irrigation and freeze protection, to reduce or eliminate groundwater pumping whenever possible. G&F
Farms is a true three-generation family farm, which might help explain their obsession to do everything possible to take care of the land for generations to come.

Tailwater Recovery system treats stormwater and offsets groundwater pumping by providing an alternate water source for irrigation [Photo by Jemmy Hinton.]

Family farming is the theme of the strawberry industry; most growers having been born into or married into the industry. Strawberry Ranch is no exception. This farm, established in 2000, is under the management of the third generation of Young family farmers. Adam Young, along with his father Ronnie and mother Pam, operate the farm in Sydney, Florida, with the day-to-day management by Adam. The farm utilizes most of the FDACS-adopted BMPs and is always open to new ideas and practices. They have recently added a new farm to this operation and will continue their outstanding management style on this new parcel named Strawberry Red Ranch. Together the farms produce 155 acres of strawberries.

The next strawberry/vegetable operation receiving a C.A.R.E.S. award was Three Star Farms of Dover, Florida. The farm began operation in 1986 when Ronnie Young took over an overgrown existing farm and with a lot of hard work, breathed life back into the tired farm. In fact, he has made Three Star one of the most productive strawberry farms
in the state. Ronnie Young is a go-to producer for UF/IFAS researchers, cooperating on many projects that have made a significant difference to the strawberry industry.

Keeping strawberry farming in the family, the last farm to receive CARES recognition was the first owned and operated by members of the Young family. Sydney Farms is an 85 acre strawberry operation dating back to the late 1970s when the farm was established by father Perry Young and sons Wayne and Ronnie. Perry has since retired leaving the operation to his sons. Ronnie’s wife Pam joined the team that runs the farm in the most efficient and environmentally sensitive manner possible. Wayne is responsible for the day to day operation of the 85 acre farm. As with the other family farms, Sydney farms applies most of the practices in the DACS-adopted Best Management Practices program.