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Watermelon packaging is booming in Gilchrist County



Billy Smith of Billy Smith Watermelon's Inc. is seen at his desk on Monday afternoon (June 18). His business is one of the watermelon-packing and shipping interests in the Tri-County Area of Gilchrist, Levy and Dixie counties.

Story, Photos and Video

By Jeff M. Hardison © June 20, 2018 at 1018 a.m.

TRI-COUNTY AREA – The watermelon business is doing relatively well this year, Loran Brookins said during a quick tour of a packaging operation in Gilchrist County on Monday afternoon (June 19).

<https://youtu.be/QaaiWtfCz30>

In this 44-second video people can be seen unloading watermelons in the background as they melons come through the machine that washes them. They go down the conveyor belt, are measured and big ones are singled out. Meanwhile some workers are seen pacing stickers on each one.

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Some of the many vehicles used to transport melons are seen here.



This is a view of melons on the back of a cut-off bus.

Washed and brushed, watermelons go onto the conveyor belt. One of the workers is in the background (left, center) moving the melons from the back of a converted school bus to the starting point on the conveyor belt.



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Forklifts move tons of watermelons each day at Billy Smith Watermelons Inc. during the season. On Monday, these drivers were seen almost dancing with the vehicles as each driver knew where the other one was going. They were efficient and quick at performing their duties.

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Loran Brookins is seen manning a four-wheel farm vehicle to provide a tour for a visiting journalist.



A bus rolls onto the property in Gilchrist County to unload watermelons and then return to the fields to be reloaded.

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As of Monday (June 18), there were 379 loads shipped so far this season from Billy Smith Watermelons Inc., Brookins said. At 40,000 pounds per load that is more than 15 million pounds of watermelons from Billy Smith's Watermelons Inc.

Billy Smith's Watermelons Inc. has been in operation since 1992. It is a relatively well-known watermelon provider in Florida.

The watermelons are grown by farmers. Harvesting crews bring the melons to the packaging plant in buses that have roofs cut off, and in large trucks.

People offload the watermelons onto a conveyor belt. The watermelons go through a rinsing machine, continuing on the conveyor belt through another new machine that measures the size of the melons.

That machine directs a mechanical device to push off the biggest melons as they go down the conveyor belt.

Melons are evaluated as being in one of three sizes.

The biggest watermelons go in plastic green boxes, with 36 melons fitting in each box, Brookins said.

The medium-sized boxes go in the white boxes with 45 per box, he said.

The smallest watermelons go into brown boxes. There are 60 watermelons in each brown box, he said.

There are other packaging plants for watermelons in the area.

Watermelons are among the many crops grown in the Tri-County Area of Levy, Dixie and Gilchrist counties. Other crops include peanuts, pecans, figs, corn, blueberries, blackberries, squash, cucumbers, tomatoes, various peppers and green beans.

Livestock in this part of Florida include cattle, swine, chicken, sheep, goats, horses, donkeys and mules. There are also farm-raised clams and oysters from this part of Florida.