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Houweling's expanding into Utah

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The construction of a new greenhouse facility in Utah is under way and by the end of the year, Camarillo, CA-based Houweling's Tomatoes should be able to service that local market and the surrounding regions with its brand of greenhouse tomatoes.

Chief Marketing Officer David Bell said if the construction proceeds on schedule, the first greenhouses in that project will be planted in October and the company could have tomatoes by early December. But giving himself a little wiggle room, he felt very confident predicting that by the end of the year that would be the case.



Tomatoes growing in a greenhouse. *(Photo courtesy of Houweling's Tomatoes)* Bell said the first phase of the Mona, UT, project consists of 28 acres and he clearly indicated future expansion is at least on the drawing board. Growing tomatoes in mountainous Utah in the winter will offer its challenges, but Houweling's has addressed that by locating its greenhouses across the road from an existing natural gas plant. The tomato producer has

forged a partnership with the natural gas producer to utilize the exhaust from that facility to heat the greenhouse and reduce CO2 emissions into the environment. Houweling's is building an exhaust pipe system, if you will, to pump that excess CO2 and heat into its greenhouses.

"Creating the technology and infrastructure represents a significant cost," said Bell. "But there is no cost to tap into that facility."

He said that makes it a viable option and it makes growing tomatoes in the dead of winter in Utah viable as well. "There is no way you could afford to heat the greenhouses without it."

Once up and running, the Utah operation will have the same mix of tomatoes that Houweling's grows in its California facility, which includes clusters on the vine, beef tomato varieties, cocktail tomatoes, Roma varieties and an assortment of others. Bell indicated that the Utah location will give the company a big transportation advantage in that region as it is relatively expensive to ship to Salt Lake City and the surrounding communities. "There are a lot of products coming in but nothing going out," meaning a trucker has to deadhead to get another load. Houweling's can service that market with fresher tomatoes at a cheaper freight cost, and can offer a backhaul to other locations for truckers coming into the community.

The company built the first phase of its Oxnard operation, which remains the centerpiece of the company, in 1996. By 2008, it had expanded to its current 125-acre size. With the temperate California climate and the greenhouse advantage, Houweling's plants a steady acreage of tomatoes all year-round with a goal of harvesting the same number of acres each week. Even though production is in a greenhouse where many environmental factors can be controlled, Bell said Mother Nature still plays a role. "The length of the day and the intensity of the sun impact production," he said.

So during the summer months — just like its competitors in the field — Houweling's sees a spike in yields. But it's a bit easier to predict as 18 years of records indicate fairly accurately how a longer day and hotter sun affect each variety. Still, there are weather changes that need to be factored in. This year, Bell said there was very little fog in May, which was atypical, so there was a spike in production as the plants were exposed to more sunlight on average than they typically are during that time.

Bell is a big proponent of greenhouse tomatoes. It is his opinion that they simply "taste better." He said consumers in greenhouse-centric locales such as the Northwest and the Northeast near Canada are more familiar with greenhouse tomatoes and their quality.

This year, Houweling's is engaging in some aggressive marketing campaigns, including a tie-in with the California Avocado Commission. Avocados and tomatoes are a natural tie-in, he said, and both organizations are pushing the California point of origin of their product with product tags and in-store signage. Bell said the promotion will run through July and into August.

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