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Southern Produce Distributors continually growing in size and staff

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The growing increase in demand for sweet potatoes has major producers making changes in many directions in order to keep up the stride to meet those demands.

Southern Produce Distributors Inc., headquartered in Faison, NC, is a perfect example of a major and always growing producer.

Stewart Precythe, president and chief executive officer, told *The Produce News* that the company has taken on a new deal in Hernandez, MS, in the past year.



Microwavable sweet potatoes from Southern Produce Distributors. "This is a farm and packing house, and Southern Produce Distributors handles sales," explained Precythe. "We hired Madeline Massey about three months ago to handle sales and

marketing there and in Faison. Madeline has a degree in marketing, and her father owns the farm. She's not only highly educated, but she also grew up in the industry."

The company's North Carolina sweet potato crop has met with some challenges this year.

On Sept. 18 it was only about 10 percent into its harvest, which is a slower than normal start. Precythe said that although he's getting good yields and quality at the Faison farms, and one grower even started a week early, some regions of the state suffered extremely dry and hot weather, which slowed the crop.

"The Rocky Mountain area has been especially dry," he said. "Yields are down and digging has been slower than normal. But we feel that what we have in house so far is very good quality. Overall, we expect our yields to be about the same as they were last year."

Precythe noted that he expects prices to remain strong in the coming year because the demand for sweet potatoes is so high.

Southern Produce has always engaged in a major sweet potato export business, especially to the E.U., but that movement will start a little later than normal this season. Precythe explained that Spain, Egypt and Israel are shipping which has weakened market prices.

"We still service our regular customers, but the majority of our exports to Europe will pump up in early November," he said. "Exporting remains a major part of our business."

Precythe also noted that the locally grown trend is having some effect on the sweet potato market because local chains push it strongly. The overall demand for sweet potatoes, however, remains strong and is growing across the country.

Southern Produce also added 35,000-square-feet to its already huge Faison facility in the past year, and it added an additional Hagen packing line, which will be operational for this season.

The company is experiencing strong acceptance to its new packaging options it launched about a year ago.

"Customers really like our eight, five-pounders and 12, three-pounders," said Precythe. "The bags have information printed on them that shows consumers different ways to prepare sweet potatoes."

He also announced that the company hired Garrett Godwin as its new farm manager last year.

"Garrett is from one of the oldest sweet potato farming families in North Carolina," said Precythe.

"My son, Kelley, and R. Sterling Cook, Jr., our chief financial officer are both in their early 30s, and are doing an outstanding job of overseeing the company's operations. I'm turning more responsibility over to them as time passes. I'm very pleased with the professionalism, experience and expertise our entire staff demonstrates."

