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Viva Fresh Expo set for Austin April 20-22

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Strap on your chaps and prepare for another exciting ride at the Viva Fresh Produce Expo. The third-annual Viva Fresh is presented at the Hilton Austin & Convention Center in Austin, TX, April 20-22.

Bret Erickson, president and chief executive officer of the Texas International Produce Association, credits his staff, totaling only four members, and its deeply involved membership for producing an event that is highly relevant to buyers, exhibitors and suppliers. He credits TIPA Chairman Jimmy Bassetti for conceptualizing Viva Fresh and pushing to make it a highly successful reality.



Exhibiting the bananas of Le Best Banana Supply at the 2016 Viva Fresh Expo in San Antonio were Kevin Thomas, Mary Stivalet-

Thomas, Andres Thomas and Phillip Cuccerre.

Erickson noted that TIPA membership mostly falls into one of three categories. First, many companies are Texas growers. Second, others are large grower-shippers who also import Mexican product. The third group strictly is Mexican produce importers.

Erickson said that Texas ports of entry have increased their receipt of Mexican fresh produce by 108 percent in eight years. Texas received approximately 225,000 loads of Mexican product in 2016. Pharr was the largest port of entry, receiving 65 percent of that volume. Laredo ranked second with 25 percent. Rio Grande City and Progreso followed.

He said the number of crossings in Pharr, TX, and Nogales, AZ, are within a couple thousand loads of being equal. "The total volume now for the South Texas-to-Nogales pipeline into the U.S. is close to 450,000 truckloads."

Erickson outlined the issues facing his membership and then explained how that agenda is so relevant to the upcoming show.

Because of the rapid business expansion for Texas importers, TIPA works diligently to increase border staffing of relevant federal agencies.

Furthermore, "We are focused on trade issues and to assure products move across the border in a timely fashion. And, we work on domestic issues, such as labor." In South Texas, there is a residential labor force, so the agricultural labor squeeze hasn't come as soon as it hit areas farther from the border. "But our guys in South Texas have felt the pinch as well." TIPA is working with United Fresh Produce Association, Western Growers Association and the Florida Fruit & Vegetable Association "to push for immigration reform. That could be the H2A program, if that's the best we can do, or a guest worker program."

"Similar to Arizona," Erickson noted, TIPA is working to increase Customs & Border Protection staff, as well as USDA-APHIS and US Food & Drug Administration professionals.

"What has jumped to the top of our focus is trade between the US and Mexico," Erickson continued. "We know renegotiation of NAFTA is imminent as is a comprehensive tax reform and a corporate tax reform and a tax code that will allow U.S. businesses to keep and reinvest more money."

The border adjustment tax "is still a concept. And what we've seen is very vague." When it comes to Mexican produce imports, "the U.S. consumers enjoy 365 days a year broccoli, tomatoes, avocados, berries and watermelon that are of very high quality and relatively low cost. A tax would add to the cost and in a lot of the country (U.S.) we can't grow those products at all, or not all-year." TIPA's position is that the Border Adjustment Tax "needs to look at agriculture and food differently" than manufactured goods.

Erickson said the rapidly expanding U.S. population is expected to need 30 percent more food within 20 years. "It has to come from somewhere," he noted.

NAFTA "by and large has been good for the US. But maybe there are areas we can improve upon." But given the escalating need for food in the US, food trade needs to be promoted.

The 2017 Viva Fresh educational program again targets increasing fruit and vegetable consumption.

After the show, \$50,000 will be donated to the United Fresh Produce Association to support their school salad bar program. The donation will provide salad bars for Texas schools.

The 2017 Viva Fresh Show

Erickson said Viva Fresh is designed to serve to growers from Texas, Oklahoma, Arizona and New Mexico — and, of course, Mexico.

He said the expectation is that the atmosphere is to allow “buyers to write PO’s right there” while speaking to exhibitors. “I want buyers to know that our focus is to make the event valuable to them. I will be disappointed if we do not have 275 buyers this year. I would love to have 300. Our focus is to create a valuable experience for the buyers. If it’s good for them, it will be good for everyone else.”

The 2017 Viva Fresh Expo will have 178 booths.

“There were 70 companies on the waiting list that we just couldn’t accommodate,” Erickson said. “Our steering committee likes the whole concept of keeping the show intimate for suppliers, exhibitors and buyers.”

The initial show, held in Austin in 2015, had 148 booths and 900 attendees, including 120 buyers. “That exceeded every metric we set for ourselves,” Erickson said.

In San Antonio at the J.W. Marriott Hill Country Resort for the second show in 2016, there were 1,600 attendees and 215 buyers.

The exhibitor space was maximized to 178 booths, with a waiting list of about 40.

“This year we’re back in Austin. We expect about 1,800 to 2,000 attendees,” Erickson said. “We maintained the 178 booths based on wanting to keep the size of the show intimate. We are committed to that size at least for the next several years.”

He added, “Our biggest challenge is to manage growth to a reasonable level. Number one, we want it to be a valuable experience for suppliers and buyers. We do not want to grow too fast or too big, to where it comes to the point that you feel that you have to go because people are going. We want them to have time to conduct business.”

For more information and a full schedule of events, visit www.vivafreshexpo.com.

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