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'End of an era' -- Snokist ends fresh pack to focus on processing

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While some fresh apple and cherry growers have lost a longtime packer, the processing side of Northwest fruit is retaining one of its top-five pear canners.

Snokist Growers, a Yakima, WA-based cooperative that has packed fresh apples, apricots, prunes, plums, cherries and pears for more than a century, announced in mid-February that it has ended that side of its operations, and company President Jim Davis told The Produce News that the decision affects 100 growers.

Mr. Davis said that approximately 250 growers contributed to the combined fresh-process volume, with 150 growing specifically for process. Many grew for both segments.

The elimination of fresh pack, he added, will not affect the employee base at Snokist facilities. The company, which will scale back from three facilities to one, employs about 150 people year-round and hits a high of 900 workers during the receiving, storing and canning season.

Mr. Davis, who had been with Snokist for a number of years and took on the position of president in August, said that in making the decision to eliminate fresh-pack from its profile, Snokist looked at recent years' bottom lines. "Fresh was about one-third of our business," Mr. Davis said Feb. 18. "But the volumes just weren't there [to continue packing]."

Last year, Snokist packed roughly 20,000 tons of fresh apples and cherries, whereas the process operation saw a higher volume of between 55,000 and 60,000 tons.

The fresh division packed only product grown by Snokist members, but the process division will supplement grower product with fruit purchased on the open market.

Mr. Davis noted that organics are an increasing factor in the Snokist process division, making up about 8 percent of the total. Each of the company's facilities has been certified to pack organics, and he said that the newer product lines of single-serve applesauce and fruit bowls as well as the 300-gallon totes are offered as organic products. Primary customers include Gerber, fruit-bar makers and juice companies.

He also said that although the applesauce and variety fruit bowls are becoming more popular, pears still comprise 55 percent of the total process output, with 40 percent in apples, cherries and prunes.

Reaction to the announcement that Snokist has ended its participation in the fresh market has shown respect for the cooperative, with Yakima Valley Growers-Shippers Association Manager Keith Mathews calling the move "an end of an era."

Mr. Davis, however, spoke optimistically about the future of the 100-year-old enterprise. "We're still a cooperative," he said.

But rather than being one of many fresh grower-shippers, Snokist is now one of "only five pear processors in the Northwest. We're much more of a player." The company markets its own product, 97 percent of which is under private label, he added.

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