
- Advertisement -

Strong start for summer Bells, cukes and tomatoes

June 8, 2020

As was often the case nationally, the spring shipping season for Farmer's Best International LLC, brought a series of new experiences. Sasha Lewton, the firm's sales manager, said everyone at his firm is pleased that 2020's early months are history. But now, there should be plenty of good news for the firm.

On June 4, Lewton said the third season of shipping from the company's new farm and packinghouse in the Mexican highlands of San Luis Potosi is well under way.

Slicer cucumber and Roma tomato shipping began about May 14. Farmer's Best vine ripe tomatoes were first shipped from the area about May 21. The firm's Bell pepper deal began May 20.

"It's all good and going very, very well. We have good volume. These deals are going tremendously well," Lewton said. "We started there on a moving market, in the low two-digits. Now we're in the high two-digits. It doesn't seem that will be stopping any time soon."

In addition to shipping its own production this summer from San Luis Potosi, Farmer's Best is also shipping Romas, grape tomatoes and elongated red Bell peppers from a long-affiliated grower in Torreon. His grape tomatoes and elongated Bells were starting in the second week of June and the Romas were under way.

"We will ship cukes all summer, linking back to our fall deal in Sonora, which begins in mid- to late-September," Lewton said. "We're year-round on cucumbers now."

For Farmer's Best, the Roma and vine ripe deals will last until mid-November. In both cases, the firm

is working to overcome a challenging two-week production gap in late November. “It’s a tricky time of year, but we’re very close to having year-round consistent volume.”

This spring, Farmer’s Best has been pleasantly surprised that its Sonoran cucumber and squash production was remaining productive into June.

Other good developing news is that Farmer’s Best plans to open a new “full-blown” warehouse and shipping facility in Pharr, TX. The facility was scheduled to be completed this September but complications caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have postponed completion until November 2020.

Shipping through Texas is nothing new for the company, but the facility will be helpful to streamlining the business.

In recent years, it has been normal for Farmer’s Best to ship 60 or 65 percent of its west Mexico vegetable volume through Texas, with the remainder passing through the firm’s Rio Rico, AZ, facility. However, the 2020 season “was a little different” because of adjustments due to the pandemic and because of strict new rules on tomato exports, due to the Tomato Suspension Agreement.

When a high level of tomato inspections was imposed in early April, there were two weeks of slight delays but since “it’s gone pretty smoothly.”

In Arizona, Farmer’s Best hosted USDA tomato inspectors at a leased facility in order to leave operational room in its home base. This spring in Texas, all USDA tomato inspections were at Farmer’s Best’s current facility.

“In 2020, the Tomato Suspension Agreement in terms of the amount of tomatoes or price-per-box was not a bad hit. But we can’t bring the volume to the border that we are used to, because of the rules that are in place. Distribution was curtailed quite a bit, as certain customers had fears” related to the handling of rejections at the receiving end.

Rejected tomatoes either had to endure the cost of disposal or the shipper had to absorb the high cost of transportation back to the crossing point. As a result, Farmer’s Best joined its customers in being more cautious in shipping. That said, the moderation “I believe has improved the overall quality of what ends up in the U.S.,” Lewton said. This was one of the factors in increasing prices this spring.

A big issue was weather-related production problems that hit Mexican fields in November and December. Then again in January. Disrupted production “impacted us until springtime,” Lewton said. “Without question, I’m glad to have this year under my belt. All here would agree. Going forward, we’ve learned about the new Tomato Suspension Agreement.

“We’re still learning about consumers’ reaction to COVID-19,” he added. “The Tomato Suspension Agreement is very doable now.”

The pandemic was “seismic early on when the stay-at-home orders first came out,” he said. “Foodservice sales stopped. There was nothing there! But then there was a huge spike in retail sales, and we could barely keep up with demand.” Then, “We saw demand evaporate from March 21 to April 1, at which point demand and shipping volumes slowly got back on track to historically normal levels. As it ticked back up, we got back to a more even keel with retail. Retail sales were up significantly, and foodservice sales were significantly down. But now we’re more in line with a normal year.”

Lewton said that internally, “Our response to COVID-19 has been an aggressive and vigilant.” Farmer’s Best has worked toward protecting its sales and administrative employees’ health through the application of several techniques. Farmer’s Best created alternating schedules of working remotely and in the office. When at Farmer’s Best, employees are required to always wear masks, with hand sanitizing and washing at regular intervals.

Furthermore, employees are sent for rapid tests and some have been asked to work from home if they have been in contact with someone who tested positive. “We have had two employees that have tested positive we responded in accordance with CDC guidelines.” No one is allowed into the Farmer’s Best warehouses other than those with immediate responsibilities there.

[Print](#)