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PAIA celebrates 20 years of representation

By

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On Sept. 5, 2001, industry importers met to discuss critical issues impacting the well-being of the Peruvian asparagus import deal. During the meeting, the group took steps to form the Peruvian Asparagus Importers Association (PAIA). This year marks its 20th year of promoting and representing that crop in the United States.

PAIA Executive Director Priscilla Lleras-Bush recently noted that during that formative year Peruvian importers agreed that they should gather twice a year to discuss subjects of mutual interest and work on marketing and regulatory issues for the industry. “We meet two times annually still and we work diligently to streamline cold chain logistics to ensure that retailers are supplied the freshest asparagus for U.S. consumers,” she said.

PAIA has also seen the value in partnering with industry providers and have included them in PAIA membership, including customs brokers and providers of services such as logistics, cold storage and fumigation. “These trusted companies have years of experience and knowledge,” Lleras-Bush said. “Their involvement enables collaboration to advance trade and certify progression within any logistics issues relating to the fresh asparagus deal.”

Of course, the main focus of PAIA has been to facilitate the promotion of Peruvian asparagus in the

United States.

“With over 200 million pounds almost every year, Peruvian asparagus proves to be a year-round product that retailers can count on for consistent quality and freshness,” she said.

Illustrating its consistent supplies Lleras-Bush revealed that in the past seven years Peru topped 200 million pounds four times and fell less than 250,000 pounds short another year. In that seven-year period, 2020 topped the chart with more than 206 million pounds with a year-over-year 3 percent increase in crop value last season.

While supply has been consistent and PAIA has a well-honed category management plan that it utilizes every season, Lleras-Bush said the group is always ready for new opportunities. “This is the produce industry after all — you can pretty much bet there are no two days in a week that are the same. There are always, shall I say, ‘opportunities’ that arise! We collectively work together as an association, combine efforts and strengths to remain laser focused on trade advancement and increasing per capita consumption year over year. Fortunately, per capita consumption for fresh asparagus continues to increase.”



Continuing on the theme of being ready for change, the PAIA executive said asparagus has been a dynamic crop with a solid growth curve. The last 10 years have been particularly active as U.S. acreage has dropped dramatically due to several factors, including rising labor costs for this labor-intensive crop.

“And truly that’s not good news for anyone,” Lleras-Bush said. “Industry wants the U.S. asparagus regions to do well because that helps the industry as a whole.”

She said while Peru’s production has remained consistent, Mexico volumes has increased significantly. She added that the USDA lists fresh asparagus as one of the top five U.S. fresh produce imports.

Commenting on PAIA’s 20th anniversary, Jeff Friedman, president of CarbAmericas in Fort Lauderdale, FL, said the organization has done a good job keeping the industry up-to-date on technical issues and representing the industry before regulatory bodies considering such topics as the fumigation protocol and tariffs. He said the existence of the organization has also facilitated the bringing together of various members of the Peruvian asparagus industry to talk about challenges and work toward solutions.

Walter Yager, who is president of Miami-based Alpine Fresh and current co-chairman of PAIA, said the organization has done an excellent job representing the industry all these years. “We’ve accomplished a lot and we continue to represent the industry to the trade and to government organizations.”

Yager said one ongoing pursuit that has not yet met its goal is the effort to eliminate or minimize the fumigation protocol. He said PAIA advocates a protocol that certifies a farm so that a growing location that follows all the best practices for pest issues will not be subject to fumigation. The fumigation process is not beneficial to asparagus and results in a shorter shelf life. It is Yager’s opinion that most of Peru’s asparagus operations follow best practices including Integrated Pest Management programs that mitigate the risk, and fumigation of their production is not necessary. “Those that don’t comply should still have to fumigate,” he said.

Lleras-Bush noted that PAIA’s website is full of great information on asparagus in general as well as the association’s promotional plans. Visit the site at: peruvianasparagusimportersassociation.com.

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