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## **It's a bright future for BrightFarms**

By

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November 22, 2021

BrightFarms Inc., which has six commercial, indoor farms across the East Coast and Midwest, made two big moves this summer that point to continued growth and a bright future.

In July, the company announced the acquisition of Ief Farms, an indoor growing operation in Loudon, NH, and its plans to expand that one-acre farm to a 14-acre operation and hub for the region. In August, Cox Enterprises, which held a majority stake in the company, announced the acquisition of BrightFarms.



Abby Prior

Recently, Chief Commercial Officer Abby Prior told *The Produce News* that the Leaf Farms acquisition expands the company's product line and the new ownership will include capital infusion and the ability to accelerate growth.

"Leaf Farms grows a unique blend of greens," Prior said, in speaking to that company's value proposition for BrightFarms.

It markets those blends under four lowercase titles that complement its lowercase name: crisp, fusion, smooth and spice. Spice is its No. 1 seller. It is a blend of mustard greens along with arugula, cressida, mizuna and leaf lettuce. Prior said the blends and Leaf (pronounced leaf) have an excellent following in the Northeast, and BrightFarms will continue to market those blends under their current brand, at least in their current marketing region. She added that there are plans to grow those blends in BrightFarms other indoor farming locations, which currently include Pennsylvania, Virginia, North Carolina, Ohio and Illinois.

Prior is very bullish on the future of indoor farming in the salad category, which is BrightFarms' specialty. "Right now, indoor farming has a 3 percent market share in the salad category," she said. "In a decade, as we build out capacity, indoor farming could have a 50 percent share of market."

In setting her sights on such a lofty outcome, Prior noted the advantages of the farming technique. It's environmentally-friendly as it uses far fewer natural resources to produce more volume. Farms can be located much closer to market greatly reducing transportation costs and the environmental impacts of shipping product across the country. Pesticide use is eliminated as BrightFarms touts its "pesticide-free," though not certified-organic, salads. Prior explained that the company uses water as its growing medium, so it has not chosen to use the certified organic label. She said that even organic-certified crops can use natural pesticides, which BrightFarms' growing processes do not use.

Prior envisions indoor farms all over the country, and will begin expanding at a rapid pace. The company is building a decentralized reservoir of farms, which Prior says can effectively compete against open field lettuce farming in the West Coast in the packaged salad space. While current farms

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are typically in the two- to four-acre ballpark, she said newer ones on the drawing board will be in the 10-40 acre range, or what the company is calling “megafarms.”

The company embraces the controlled environment agriculture moniker but does differentiate itself from vertical farming. “Vertical farming uses artificial lights to grow their crops,” she said. “We do use some lighting, but our main source of light is the most sustainable, planet-friendly source, the sun.”

BrightFarms’ top seller among its dozen products is “Sunny Crunch,” a salad blend that its website touts with the descriptor: “It looks like a leafy green but eats like iceberg. It’s light, crispy, crunchy...”

Returning to the I?f Farms acquisition, Prior said the integration of I?f into BrightFarms is complete. “They are now BrightFarmers,” she quipped, noting the entire I?f team has come aboard, combining sales efforts where appropriate.

As Prior reflects on the company’s potential for growth, she believes her optimistic view of the future is very realistic. “I have been here for six years, and we have had double-digit growth every year and we are increasing our acreage every year. We are growing as fast as our capacity is increasing. BrightFarms is up 48 percent this year and I?f Farms is up 20 percent, which is very impressive because that increase is on the same one-acre farm.”

She added that it is very difficult to equate production of an indoor farm with open field farming because it is different for every crop, but Prior said a multiplication factor of 10-13 times is realistic. In other words, a 10-acre indoor farm can produce as much product as a 130-acre farm.

BrightFarms can be found at the New York Produce Show where it will provide insights on its growth strategies to best service retailers across the country.

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