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TIPA adapting to needs with new programs

By

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Dante L Galeazzi, the CEO and president of [Texas International Produce Association](#) has a simple philosophy in managing the group, which revolves around being flexible as the industry changes.

“TIPA is always growing and adapting to meet the needs of our industry and our region,” he said. “Just this year we kicked off two great programs.”

Y-TIPA refers to the “Young Members of TIPA,” which is a new networking and education group for TIPA members under the age of 35.



Dante L Galeazzi

“This committee was created with the intent of helping new professionals entering the fresh produce industry build valuable connections within the TIPA network, be introduced to the resources and information centers available, and to generally build their knowledge of the industry they’ll be working in,” he said, noting that the kick-off event attracted more than 70 young Texas produce professionals.

In collaboration with the South Texas Assets Consortium (STAC), TIPA also worked to expand the Customs and Border Patrol Agricultural Inspector Internship program from its pilot status to a fully operational model. “Last year, two of the ports-of-entry in South Texas — Pharr & Rio Grande City — took on an intern from a local university. This year, the program has expanded to accommodate seven interns between the two locations.”

Galeazzi called the program “a win for all parties.” He offered that University of Texas at Rio Grande Valley students can gain experience and potentially be offered a position in CBP following successful completion on the internship. For CBP, the program allows the agency to develop potential employees and identify qualified candidates. For the produce industry, it means additional federal personnel at the ports, improved efficiency and faster processing times due to more resources.

With the winter produce season under way, the TIPA executive told *The Produce News* that outside circumstances have altered the picture for 2021-22.

“Typically, Texas grapefruit and oranges kick off the season but due to the 2021 Valentine freeze those shipments won’t get rolling until later in November. Greens have started and look great. Volume is still light as we’re on the very front end of activity.”

He added that imports are starting to pick-up, with squash and tomatoes being the first items to gain volume as the season gets underway.

Galeazzi is expecting a strong import season for Mexico-produced product crossing at the Texas border. In 2020, more than 530,000 loads of Mexican fruits and vegetables came into the United States with about 290,000 loads, or 55 percent, crossing at a Texas port of entry.

That number continues to increase every year. In 2007, imports from Mexico totaled about 101,000 loads. Since 2010, imports have risen close to 220 percent. Galeazzi said the average annual growth rate of fruit and vegetable crossings since 2007 has been 14.3 percent.

Though, he did not comment on specific commodities, Galeazzi said there are trends from the 40,000-foot view that are worth noting.

“It does feel like consumers are continuing to ask for items with lots of vitamin C. Shippers continue to hear requests for more commodities to be in consumer packs, and it feels like every year there is more added to the ‘snacking’ category — which is great! If we can make eating fresh fruits and vegetables easier, that’s something the whole industry can support.”

He said many challenges the Texas produce industry is facing this winter are not unique.

“Getting product across the border shouldn’t experience any delays out of the ordinary. The bigger challenges will be those experienced at a national level — labor shortages, capacity crunches for trucks, increased costs for packaging, and a host of other supply chain disruption-related impacts,” he said. “We expect, especially now as the season gets started, that there will be many conversations between suppliers and buyers regarding how to handle and adjust ordering and rates to accommodate these changes.”

South Texas has been well known for its citrus, especially grapefruit, for several generations, but as alluded to by Galeazzi, this will be a difficult year.

“The 2021 Valentine Freeze was terrible. It resulted in nearly \$600 million in losses to the Texas citrus and vegetable crops,” he said. “This year’s citrus crop will be lighter, without a doubt. The forecasts are indicating roughly 30 percent the normal volume for this year, which is honestly much better than some of the initial projections.”

He noted that the other big impact from the freeze is the timing of this year’s crop. “We already know that we’re starting the season roughly six weeks behind schedule and will likely wrap up the season well before our typical May time frame. Next year, we should see a more typical shipping season in terms of time frame.”

While it will take time for the industry to rebound from the freeze as there was damage to fruitwood, Galeazzi is confident that the industry will fully recover.

“While the last freeze was over 30 years ago (1989), many of the people in the industry today lived through that freeze so they remember what recovery looks like,” he said. “It will take a season or two to get the trees back to full health, but the industry won’t stop. We can expect more growers to take this opportunity to plant new groves, possibly push out older, lower producing trees and replace them with new varieties — such as the Texas Red Grapefruit, which has a darker red flesh and sweeter flavor.”

Though he said getting product across the border shouldn’t be an issue, Galeazzi did note that all eyes will be on CBP in late November when the federal mandate for government workers to be vaccinated goes into effect.

“We are hopeful that this mandate does not see a large departure of agents and interrupts the critical mission areas these agents provide —security, disease and pest prevention, and traffic processing.”

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