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Fresh Farms seeing outstanding quality on early crops

By

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Rio Rico, AZ — Six weeks into its vegetable season, [Fresh Farms](#) is seeing outstanding quality on most items due to favorable weather in Sonora.

“We started in mid-September with yellow and grey squash and zucchini, followed by cukes and green beans out of Sonora,” Al Voll, who is part of the sales team at Fresh Farms, said in early November. “This is our second year with green beans from Sonora, and we’re excited that we’ll have them in decent volume for Thanksgiving.”

Voll said Fresh Farms was seeing high quality on its American slicing cucumbers out of Sonora, and was expecting similar for its long English cukes that were expected to kick off around Nov. 10.

“The Molina family does an outstanding job with their cucumber program, both American slicers and English seedless, and we’ve developed a great following,” he said. “We’ll be doing a wrapped three-pack as a value-added offering for certain retailers this season.”

He added that Fresh Farms was expecting its colored peppers out of Sonora to start Dec. 1 or sooner, depending on if the weather stays warm.

Voll noted that Fresh Farms also has a strong eggplant program, which was due to start in mid-November, and he was also looking forward to the start of hard squashes, like spaghetti, butternut, acorn and kabocha.

Watermelon is another key crop for Fresh Farms, and the company is in the heart of its Sonoran watermelon season.

“It’s probably the best crop we’ve ever seen,” said Voll. “The favorable weather has produced fruit with outstanding flavor, color and consistency, and it is being well received by the industry.

Following Sonora, Fresh Farms will look to Sinaloa to the south, where it has a sizable green pepper program that was expected to start in mid- to late November.

“Over all, the growing conditions for our Sonoran vegetable deal have been stellar, and we expect the quality to be extremely high due to that,” he said.

Echoing what many in the industry say about COVID, Voll said that while the pandemic put a “stranglehold” on the foodservice side of the business, Fresh Farms’ retail business surged.

“Families have gotten accustomed to eating at home more, and they are seeing the savings that

result from that, and so that trend continues,” he said. “We’re also seeing an increased business with discount banners, who use off sizes. These discount stores are seeing phenomenal growth.”

But COVID-19 also brought with it certain challenges that remain tough to overcome, especially freight.

“Freight rates are probably our biggest obstacle right now,” said Voll. “Two years ago, I was paying \$6,800 for a load to the Northeast; today we are paying \$9,600, and that unfortunately is being passed along to consumers. We’re being told that it might be 24 months before things start coming back down.”

He said one problem is that dry freight is in such demand that companies are using reefer units for that purpose, leaving perishables with a shortage of trucks.

“COVID was certainly a game-changer,” said Voll. “I have been in the industry for 41 years and I have never seen anything quite like this.”

Grape deal to expand

Fresh Farms is well known as a table grape shipper, providing a year-round supply between its production from Mexico and California, and Voll said the company will be expanding its grape program with an earlier start to fill a void between the end of the Chilean season and start of Mexico production.

“We’ll have grapes as early as March from Jalisco,” said Voll. “We can offer good, fresh varietal grapes without storage.”

He said Fresh Farms will source from Jalisco from late March until early May, followed immediately by Sonora in early May and then California production kicks in by mid-July.

Fresh Farms is heavily geared toward the newest and highest quality varietal grapes in its Mexican program, and continues to produce a great number of the famous Cotton Candy, along with Sweet Celebration, a red variety.

Photo: Roberto Hernandez, Al Voll, Martha Noriega and Marco Serrano at the Fresh Farms office in Rio Rico, AZ.

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