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**JULY 13-14TH, 2022**  
Monterey Conference Center



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**OPS smashes attendance record**

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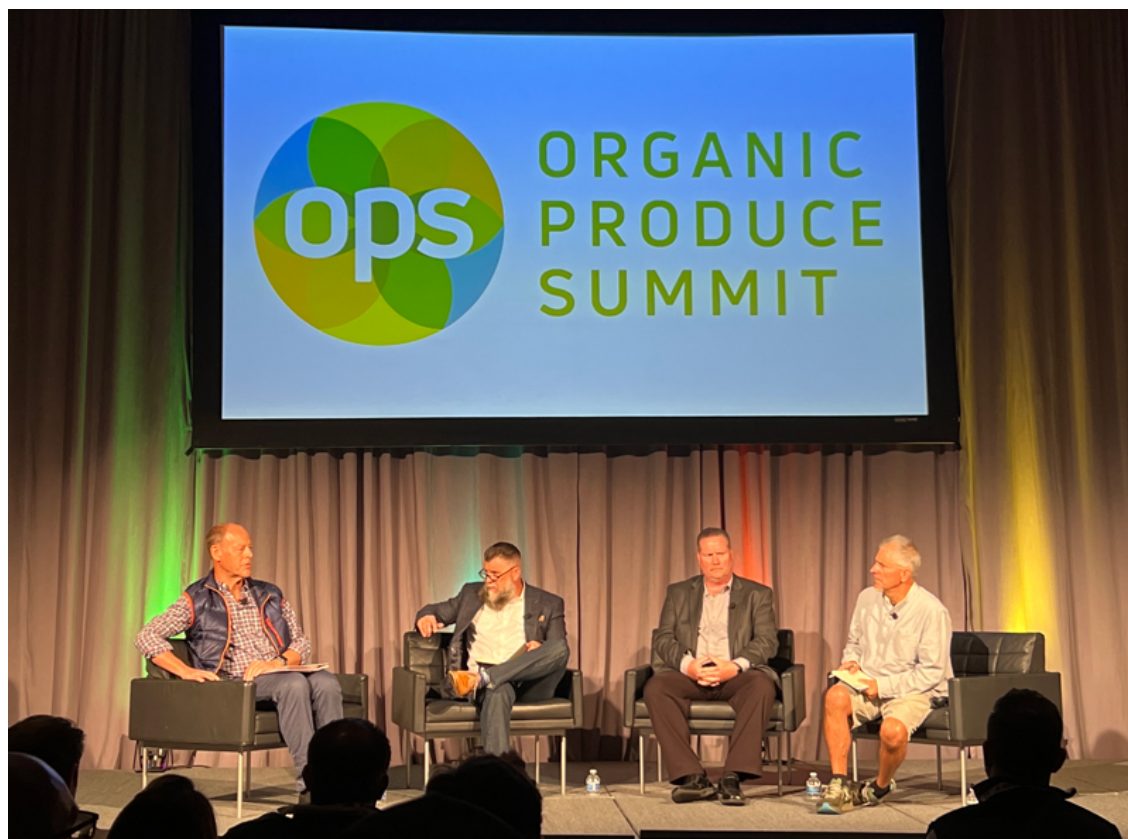
By

Tim Linden

July 15, 2022

With more than 1,700 registrants, a sold-out trade show featuring more than 150 exhibitors and a robust educational program, the 2022 [Organic Produce Summit](#) was an unmitigated success.

OPS President Susan Canales said the return to the Monterey Conference Center after a two-year, COVID-related absence resulted in the biggest and best show yet. She noted the aisles were full from the opening bell on Thursday, July 14, until the doors were shut about five hours later. She noted there were more than 300 retailers in attendance and the excitement level was sky high. Indeed, exhibitors and attendees marveled at the enthusiasm of those in attendance.



Walter Robb, former

co-CEO of Whole Foods, led a retail panel at OPS that included Michael Schutt of Raley's, Jeff Cady of Tops Markets and Edmund LaMacchia of Whole Foods.

OPS veteran exhibitor Stephen Paul of Homegrown Organic Farms in Porterville, CA, said it was a fabulous show as he stood in the company booth surrounded by many customers and fellow colleagues. Robb Bertels, who was walking the show as vice president of sales and marketing for Santa Maria, CA-based Gold Coast Packing Inc. for the first time, was amazed at the number of attendees. After several laps around the two rooms of exhibitors, he was making one more loop to

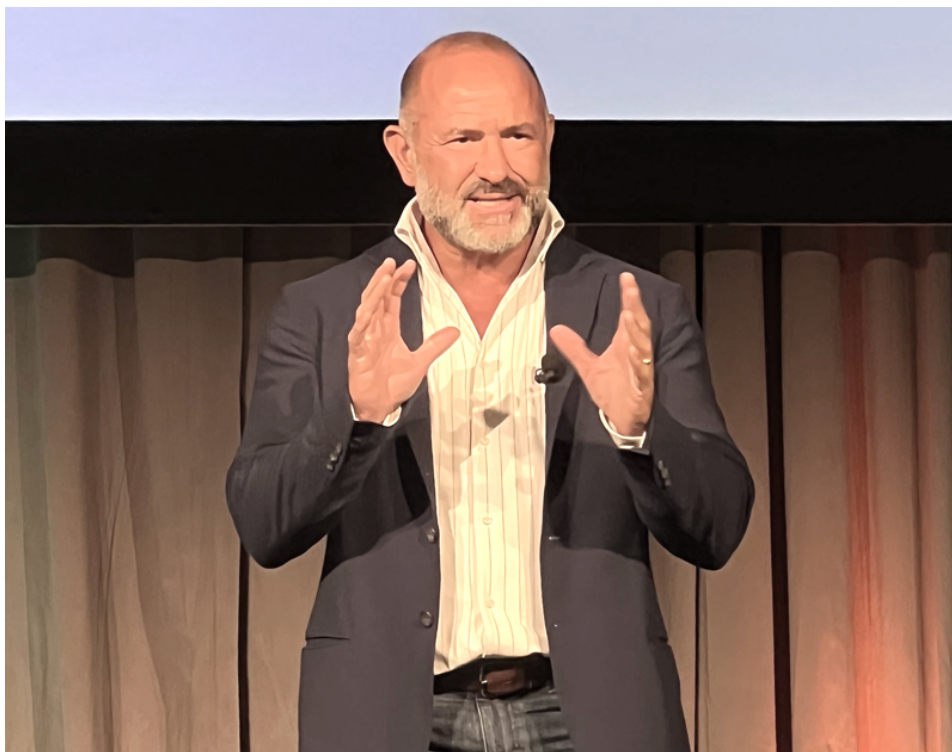
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see who else he could see. Downey, CA-based Veg-Land Inc. General Manager Dominic Etcheberria also reported that it was a great show with lots of traffic.

Canales gave a shout out to OPS Founder Matt Seeley and the keynote presenters as a good portion of the program had to be reworked in the previous 24 hours as pandemic-related cancellations altered the lineup. OPS is noted for its three keynote presentations each year that are thought provoking and feature out-of-the-box thinkers. This year was no exception.

Seeley in turn praised the panel of retail pinch hitters for putting together a dynamic program. Originally, longtime retailer and former Whole Foods CEO Walter Robb was set to interview two current executives from that iconic organic retail operation, but COVID-19 prevented both of those panelists from attending. Instead, Robb was joined on stage by fellow Whole Foods produce veteran Edmund LaMacchia, Raley's Supermarkets Director of Produce & Floral Michael Schutt and Jeff Cady, director of produce and floral at Tops Friendly Market. The panelists gave a full endorsement for the role fresh produce, and especially organic produce, can play in the health of Americans.

LaMacchia looked over the packed auditorium and noted that the organic produce industry has come a very long way since he began searching for organic suppliers about four decades ago. Schutt credited Robb and LaMacchia for being organic pioneers and providing the foundation for which he and others have built their careers. He noted that Raley's has embraced the food as medicine concept offering a robust organic produce department as well as removing sugary snacks from the checkout stands and eliminating tobacco sales.



David Katz, founder and president of Plastic Bank, was a keynote speaker at OPS.

Cady looked to audience suppliers to help him grow the category and provide even a greater assortment and quantity of organic produce in the future. Robb opined that the organic industry's best days are ahead of it. He said that organic sales increased tremendously during the pandemic but there is still a huge opportunity for continued growth, even during an economic slowdown. He reminded that Whole Foods saw tremendous growth during the recession of 2008-09.

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The other two keynote addresses were equally compelling.

David Katz, founder of the Plastic Bank, served up this year's visionary presentation. Founded in 2013, the Plastic Bank is a for-profit social enterprise with a goal of cleaning up the plastic in our oceans and on our beaches by using plastic as a currency. Collectors — from poor communities, schools, churches and many other walks of life — can exchange plastic for hard goods, education, food and almost anything else cash currency can buy.

He said the idea is to not only clean up the waste in our oceans but to stop the flow at the spigot. His ultimate goal is eliminating poverty. He noted that it is very difficult for people living in poverty to worry about the environment when they are merely trying to survive. To end many social crises, he argues that the world must solve poverty first.



John Ruane, senior vice president and chief omnichannel merchandising officer of the Giant Co., was one of the keynote speakers at OPS. *Photos by John Groh*

The keynote address by John Ruane, senior vice president of omnichannel merchandising for The Giant Co., gave the audience a tutorial on retail merchandising as the country settles into its third decade of the 21st century. He explained that consumers are engaged and are engaging in many new ways as they make their buying decisions. It's no longer a one to one effort with retailers doing the merchandising in store and consumers moving a cart through an aisle and reacting to those merchandising schemes. Technology has greatly evolved merchandising and the shopper.

Ruane said retailers must have a multi-channels approach, which includes cross-channeling initiated by the consumer. But he did say that ultimately shoppers are still looking to save time, and convenience is at the top of their list. "How do we make their lives easier" is still the main goal, he said. Ruane also noted that the relationship the shopper has with the retailer is very important. He said the key to success for the retailer is to adapt to change as quickly as possible, train your team well and built strategic relationships with the vendor community.



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The educational sessions covered a myriad of topics, including controlled environment agriculture, regenerative farming, supply chain issues, expansion of private label and the growth in organics in an inflationary environment.

CEA remains a hot topic item as the discussion in part 1 of the CEA program revolved around an effort by in-the-dirt farmers to use the courts to force the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Organic Program to eliminate CEA production from being certified as organically grown. The lawsuit is currently in a court of appeals where it is feared that a stroke of the pen by two of three judges will change the rules that have been in place for close to three decades.

Lawsuit opponent Lee Frankel, executive director of the Coalition for Sustainable Organics, frames the issue as an effort to force all organic growers to farm in the same old-fashioned method of generations ago, eliminating innovation from the industry. He claims that it is innovation that has allowed CEA production to expand exponentially using less water and other natural resources to produce more volume on less land. Though the lawsuit litigants were originally on the panel, moderator Todd Linsky of the podcast Todd-versations, said they chose not to attend.

A second CEA session focused on the potential of that farming technique with operators in that field opining that it has the potential of greatly increasing the volume and affordability of organic produce. Though there are some items that will almost certainly be field grown for generations to come, the panelists reported on the expanding list of CEA products, including leafy greens and berries. Already, CEA accounts for a majority share of the organic production of tomatoes, cucumbers, Bell peppers, mushrooms, sprouts and herbs, according to Linsky.

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## About Tim Linden |

Tim Linden grew up in a produce family as both his father and grandfather spent their business careers on the wholesale terminal markets in San Francisco and Los Angeles.

Tim graduated from San Diego State University in 1974 with a degree in journalism. Shortly thereafter he began his career at The Packer where he stayed for eight years, leaving in 1983 to join Western Growers as editor of its monthly magazine. In 1986, Tim launched Champ Publishing as an agricultural publishing specialty company.

Today he is a contract publisher for several trade associations and writes extensively on all aspects of the produce business. He began writing for The Produce News in 1997, and currently wears the title of Editor at Large.

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