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**Grower Alliance adds new watermelon, strawberry programs**

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By

John Groh

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During its 16 years in business, [Grower Alliance](#) has developed a reputation as a leading grower-shipper of watermelons. It is now taking another step forward in that regard with a new program out of the Dominican Republic.

Michelle Ramirez-Jacobson said Grower Alliance began operations in the DR last year and just received its first load of watermelons on Jan. 23

“In fact, they are going through Customs as we speak,” she told ***The Produce News*** on Jan. 24.

Ramon Barazza, who works in sales at Grower Alliance, said the company expects a total of 40 loads of watermelon this season from the Dominican Republic. Product will be received at the company’s warehouse in the Miami area before being distributed to accounts on the East Coast and in the Midwest.

“We’ve been working on this since last year, and we had to figure out all the logistics and maritime regulations,” said Ramirez-Jacobson. “This was uncharted territory for us, but our purchasing manager has been amazing. She had to calculate everything by weight and container, and ship our packaging from the Port of Veracruz to the DR, where it will be packed. And Ramon stepped up and took charge of working with Customs. He’s running the show for us with compliance matters and all regulations, which has been great because it was all new to us.”

Barazza said the process is much different than a land-based shipment. For example, he said freight must be paid up front before product is released. Also, the wait time for product to be released is 12 to 24 hours, compared to just a couple of hours when product crosses on land into the United States from Mexico.

“It was a real learning experience for all of us,” said Barazza. “One of the key takeaways was the need for a good and knowledgeable customs broker. We’re using K&K International Logistics out of Nogales, which took care of everything for us from the booking to taking care of the fees to the paperwork from the port. They update us continually on everything as it happens.”

Aside from adding product from a new growing region, the development is notable for the potential to open business opportunities for Grower Alliance in previously untapped territories.

“This enables us to open our watermelon market to the East Coast and Midwest,” said Barazza. “If we get good traction with the watermelons, it could open up opportunities for our other products in these regions. But for now, it is just watermelons.”

Aside from the new Dominican watermelon program, Grower Alliance has been working on its

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fledgling strawberry deal, with product coming out of Baja California.

“Our new strawberry program is off to a good start,” said Barazza. “It’s still a pretty small deal, with just a 12 hectares out of Baja. We’re expecting our first load at the middle to end of next week, and it should run through late April if all things go according to plan.”

He added that Grower Alliance has been getting some good interest on its strawberry program from customers on the West Coast and up into Canada. He speculated that weather issues in Mexico and Florida have affected strawberry volumes from those regions, causing customers to look for new suppliers.

“These berries are so sweet, the Brix level on them is amazing,” said Ramirez-Jacobson. “We had some samples direct from the fields and the flavor was outstanding, much better than expected. The expertise of our grower, Rancho Magaña, was crucial to the success of our first effort with strawberries. They are third-generation growers with tremendous knowledge about growing the crop, and they truly delivered for us this year. We are very excited.”

She said the berries are the Frontera variety and will be marketed under the Grower Alliance label. And while the deal is still in its nascent phase, it has potential for growth and could eventually take advantage of the new business opportunities Grower Alliance is opening in the Midwest and East Coast with its Dominican watermelon program.

“We don’t have the volume to do a full load to the East Coast,” said Barazza. “That could be something we do in the future, but right now we could provide them as part of a mixed load.”

[John Groh](#)

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## About John Groh |

John Groh graduated from the University of San Diego in 1989 with a bachelors of arts degree in English. Following a brief stint as a sportswriter covering the New York Giants football team, he joined The Produce News in 1995 as an assistant editor and worked his way up the ranks, becoming publisher in 2006. He and his wife, Mary Anne, live in northern New Jersey in the suburbs of New York City.

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