

Greenhouse Vegetables

Marketing Profile

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Greenhouse tomatoes resilient during outbreak

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Last summer's Salmonella Saintpaul outbreak hit the tomato industry hard, but the greenhouse industry fared better than most.

Consumers and retailers alike have a positive perception of the safety of greenhouse product, said Aaron Quon, greenhouse category director for The Oppenheimer Group, Vancouver, British Columbia.

"In the wake of the outbreak, sales of greenhouse tomatoes surged," Quon said.

"Especially while the cause was still being determined, there seemed to be more confidence in the safety of greenhouse tomatoes over field-grown."

Demand was so high Village Farms LP sold out, said Doug Kling, senior vice president of sales, marketing and fulfillment for the Eatontown, N.J.-based company.

"Retailers wanted greenhouse-grown products during this time because they understand the products are not prone to the same vulnerabilities as field-grown products," he said.

Confusion complicates

Because the nature of the outbreak and ensuing advisories was uncertain, the FDA's handling had consumers unsure of what products were safe.

"It appeared consumers switched to alternative types of produce out of fear and confusion from the handling of the crisis by the FDA," said Brian Beggs, president of Langley, British Columbia-based BC Hot House Foods Inc.

"Canadian greenhouse production was cleared almost immediately, so once we were able to en-

sure customers that the consumption of our product was safe, the volume of calls (from concerned consumers) slowed."

But that didn't help growers from other regions, he said.

"Unfortunately, for many quality tomato growers in the Southern U.S. and Mexico, they just happened to be situated in the counties and states that were under the FDA health and advisory watch," he said.

Desert Glory Ltd., San Antonio, which markets under the NatureSweet brand, continued shipping because its products were small and on the vine, said Bryant Ambelang, president and chief executive officer.

Lack of traceback utilization

However, it seemed the FDA could have used companies' traceback systems better.

"We were allowed to continue to ship our branded products because our tomatoes are small and on-the-vine," he said. "The fact that Desert Glory has 100% product traceability programs and food safety documents in place provided us no coverage from the recall in this instance."

To that end, Desert Glory is working with lawmakers to develop a "fast track" system in which farmers and packers would get certified to do business during food safety incidents.

"We need a system that rewards growers who are willing to implement GAPs and traceback programs," Ambelang said. "When a food safety failure occurs, those participants in the certification system have the opportunity to quickly and efficiently show test results and documentation that will expedite their return to commerce and ultimately narrow the FDA's source search."