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COVERING FRESH PRODUCE AROUND THE GLOBE SINCE 1897

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Village Farms grows 'green' at facilities in Texas and British Columbia

BY TIM LINDEN

Almost by definition, greenhouse production is an environmentally friendly way to work the land, according to Helen Aquino, marketing manager for Village Farms.

"We get 1,500 acres of production out of a 50-acre greenhouse," said Ms. Aquino. "And our water usage is much less on a pound-produced basis. So if you factor in nothing else but water conservation and land preservation, greenhouse production uses far fewer natural resources."

Village Farms is a 20-year-old grower-shipper that produces tomatoes, cucumbers and green peppers under glass in both Texas and British Columbia in a hydroponic growing operation. The firm has more than 232 acres of its own greenhouse production and markets an additional 160 acres of greenhouse output from other growers. The company's headquarters are in Delta, BC, but the executive offices are in Eatontown, NJ.

Speaking from the New Jersey offices, Ms. Aquino said that the company is very proud of its "green" scorecard. "Growing under glass or any kinds of plastic shade structure affords efficiencies that relate very well to environmental friendliness," she said. "And our company is on the cutting edge of technology in this regard and so we are further ahead than most greenhouse growers when it comes to being green."

First and foremost, she pointed to the firm's very efficient use of water. Village Farms' crops are grown hydroponically in a recycled coconut husk medium. That medium

has proven to be a very effective way to process the water through the system on a continual basis. "We have a gutter system that lets us recycle our water and use it up to five times in the growing process," she said.

And once the nutrient content of the water has been exhausted, it is pumped to a holding pond, where it continues to be used. In Texas, that holding pond is used to irrigate native grasses that are in turn used by a local rancher to graze his cattle. In Canada, the spent water is also used to irrigate the surrounding land.

"Our researchers have estimated that we use 86 percent less water than crops grown in soil on a pound-produced basis," she said.

Ms. Aquino revealed that another environmental advantage to greenhouse growing is the lack of need to use chemicals to control weeds or diseases. "We have no soil, so we have no weeds and we have no soil-borne pests. So we do not need herbicides or pesticides in our production," she said.

Ms. Aquino said that Village Farms is not a certified organic operation because it uses synthetic compounds in its water to provide nutrients to the plants. "These compounds are very environmentally friendly, but they are not organic," she said.

The company's marketing manager once again pointed to land utilization as another important "green" component to the Village Farms operation. Obviously, maximizing production out of any land in an environmentally beneficial way is a huge plus. And the company does so without the over utilization of other resources. Ms.

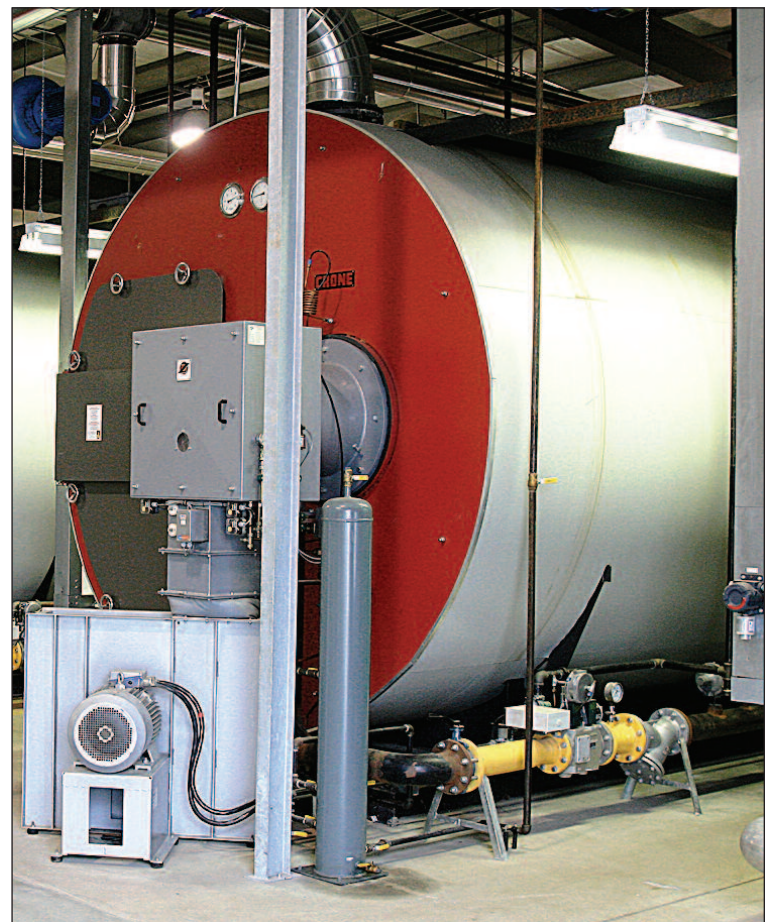
Aquino said that no artificial light is used in the company's greenhouse operations. The greenhouses are heated but the firm has what she called "a very efficient boiler system" to heat the greenhouses, with the byproduct carbon dioxide captured and piped into the greenhouses for additional utilization by the plants themselves.

With these various environmentally friendly activities, Village Farms is eager to highlight its sustainable methods. As such, it has developed a trademarked program it calls the Barefoot Plan, which works to build awareness of Village Farms' green agricultural practices every step of the way.

Ms. Aquino said that the company's carbon footprint is much smaller than traditional producers of the same crops and it wants consumers to know this. Much of the marketing it does is designed to drive consumers to its web site so they can learn about the firm's production methods.

Of course, being green is important, but Ms. Aquino said that the company's top priorities are still food safety and quality.

"Everyone is more and more conscious about food safety, and growing in an enclosed environment is a very big benefit. We don't have some of the [food-safety] issues that growers



Village Farms uses high-efficiency boilers to heat its greenhouses in Texas and British Columbia. Byproduct carbon dioxide is reclaimed and pumped back into the greenhouse for use by the plants. (Photos courtesy of Village Farms)

who produce in the outdoors have," she said.

Tomatoes-on-the-vine is the company's signature product, marketed under the "Village Farms" label, with the descriptive and registered qualifier "HydroPerfect" on that label. The company also sells many

other tomato SKUs ranging from beefsteaks to smaller specialty tomatoes it calls "Hydro-Bites."

Various colored sweet Bell pepper varieties as well as long English seedless cucumbers round out the firm's stable of products.



Tomatoes-on-the-vine is the signature item produced by Village Farms.



At Village Farms' Fort Davis Division in Fort Davis, TX, 40 acres of greenhouses under production yield the equivalent of 1,200 acres of field-grown product.