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## Village Farms proving to be a good neighbor in Texas

BY JOHN GROH

EATONTOWN, NJ — Village Farms, a premier grower and marketer of hydroponic greenhouse-grown products, based here, has announced a land preservation and water conservation project at its Texas facilities that positions the company to be a good steward of the land as well as a good neighbor to area ranches and puts into action its slogan, "What's good for the earth is good for business."

At its greenhouse facilities in the Texas towns of Marfa and Fort Davis, Village Farms is using a closed hydroponic system and recycling its nutrient-rich water back through the greenhouse for use up to four times, at which point the water is depleted of its nutritive value and pumped to a lined holding pond outside the greenhouse. From there, it is sent out through irrigation pipes to center-pivot sprinklers, where it is used to irrigate surrounding ranchland. As a result of this irrigation, native grasslands are able to thrive, and local ranchers can graze their cattle on this acreage.

Nitrate-rich wastewater that typically would be allowed to seep into the land and potentially contaminate the groundwater is instead taken up in the roots of the grass and consumed by livestock.

The concept of reusing the production water in the greenhouse and then utilizing it for irrigation for ranchland was developed by Albert Vanzeyst and Michael DeGiglio, co-founders of Village Farms, who recognized the need to conserve water in the especially arid high-desert region of the upper Rio Grande region, where the facilities are located.

While the cost to Village Farms to im-

plement and maintain the system is high, company officials believe the environmental and social benefits far outweigh the economic considerations.

"If you look at the number one contaminator of groundwater globally, it is agriculture," Mr. DeGiglio, chairman and chief executive officer of Village Farms, told *The Produce News* during a late Oc-



Ranchland in Marfa, TX, near the Village Farms hydroponic facility uses hydroponic wastewater for irrigation. As a result, area ranchers can graze livestock on normally barren land.

tober interview at the company's headquarters. "And if you take the approach that the same amount of water will fall to the ground today as did 100 million years ago, with the only change being consumption, we will not be able to sustain the population," which he said is predicted to rise to approximately 14 billion in 50 years from 7.5 billion today.

In comparing Village Farms' system to a field-grown tomato operation, Mr. DeGiglio said that his operation uses one-seventh the amount of water to

grow a tomato without contaminating the water. What's more, as an intensive agriculture operation, the company can produce much more product on far fewer acres, thus adding the land-conservation component.

"Put it this way," said Mr. DeGiglio, "there is a nine-hole golf course [near the Texas greenhouse facilities] at 5,000-foot elevation that uses as much water for irrigation as we use on 40 acres to grow nearly 20 million pounds of product."

Village Farms said that the program has been well received by the state of Texas, whose Commission on Environmental Quality worked with the company to determine the fertilizer application amounts and irrigation rates needed for the grass crop to ensure that there are no adverse effects to the environment.

The program is part of Village Farms' "Barefoot Plan," a comprehensive five-point plan that emphasizes water conservation, land preservation, integrated pest management, carbon dioxide recycling and food safety.

On the food-safety front, Mr. DeGiglio said that the Texas greenhouse facilities received a perfect score during

third-party Good Agricultural Practices audits earlier this year for food-safety and employee-safety inspections.

"It is extremely important that Village Farms operate at the pinnacle of food-safety standards in this industry," Mr. DeGiglio said. "In these very competitive times, having the highest scores, which we publish and communicate to the industry, goes a long way in differentiating our brand and is a very important selling point for our sales and marketing team."