

Greenhouse Vegetables

Marketing Profile

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THE PACKER

Food safety track record ranks high under glass

By Pamela Riemenschneider
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One of the benefits of growing “under glass” is the ability to control who — and what — comes in contact with vegetables.

However, the industry could do a better job of getting that word out to the public, said Brian Beggs, president of Langley, British Columbia-based BC Hot House Foods Inc.

“As a whole, the greenhouse industry here has done a remarkably poor job of self-promoting our track record in terms of food safety,” he said.

Beggs said his company strives to promote its records at the retail level.

“Often, the relationship is synergistic as many retailers are now looking for suppliers with high standards in food safety,” he said. “However, the message is more difficult to get to consumers.”

Helen Aquino, marketing administrator for Eatontown, N.J.-based Village Farms LP, said the company earned a perfect score on its most recent third-party food safety audits in its Texas facilities.

That kind of information is valuable to a select audience.

“For people who know and understand the technology, there is much appreciation for the high food safety standards,” she said. “The perception is just not mainstream yet. However, we are work-

ing on it.”

Kingston, Ontario-based Mastronardi Produce Ltd. communicates its food safety practices through retailers and directly to consumers through packaging and promotions on its Web site, said Chris Veillon, marketing manager.

“We conduct daily testing on our produce for listeria and other pathogens and bacteria,” he said. “We have a very strict food safety program in place to ensure that we are 100% compliant with auditing firms.”

Favorable perception

The fact that growers complete food safety audits and certifications is a selling point with retailers, said Aaron Quon, greenhouse category director for The Oppenheimer Group, Vancouver, British Columbia. However, that message isn’t typically high on a consumer’s radar.

“I do believe there is a prevailing opinion among consumers that by nature greenhouses offer a safer growing environment, protected from the environment and involving fewer pesticides, if any, in the production cycle,” he said.

Food safety training is conducted with each and every employee at Desert Glory Ltd., San Antonio.

“Food safety is woven into the culture of our company,” said Bryant Ambelang, president and chief executive officer. “We have a



Courtesy L&M Cos.

Although greenhouses protect vegetables from animals and environmental factors, food safety still lies in the hands of the workers who handle the product, says T.J. Bauer, director of sales for L&M Cos., Raleigh, N.C.

high level of confidence in the safe production of tomatoes and implement stringent programs to enforce these standards.”

The company also conducts monthly drills to trace back a tomato package at retail or foodservice to the specific greenhouse location, date and time of harvest.

Greenhouses are an important barrier to unwanted animals that could pose food safety risks, Ambelang said.

It also is a barrier from potential

drift or other air pollutants that could affect quality and safety.

T.J. Bauer, director of sales for L&M Cos., Raleigh, N.C., said the most important part of food safety still lies with the people who handle the product.

Greenhouses protect growing from animals and environmental factors, he said.

“But it’s still just as hard on the employee side,” he said. “So much of it is recordkeeping and employee hygiene.”