



WEST TEXAS

Company plans to build massive
greenhouses near Fort Davis

TOMATOES

By ROYCE JONES
Staff Writer

FORT DAVIS – The far West Texas region of the Davis Mountains, where rainfall is short and temperatures and altitude are high, seems an unlikely place for a massive tomato farm.

But the end of this summer will see the first plants set their fruit, and by November harvest will begin under a 20-acre greenhouse about two miles south of this town of about 500 residents.

Village Farms, an offspring company of Agro Power Development, has started construction on one of two 20-acre greenhouse buildings it plans to build at a cost of about \$23 million.

The metal frame of the building virtually is complete, and tempered glass panels were being put into place early last week.

Village Farms is planning to produce 16 million pounds of tomatoes each year, after all 40 acres of greenhouse buildings are complete. These tomatoes will be more than half of Texas' current



APD already has a tomato greenhouse in New York state, but the growing season is much shorter there than in West Texas. The company started looking for a site in the Southwestern United States to expand its business about a year ago.

It was Brian Behen's job to find the site. "I drove around Arizona, New Mexico and this part of Texas," he said. Behen was looking for the right climate for tomato production. When he got to Fort Davis, it didn't take him long to make up his mind.

"I was here about one hour and couldn't stay longer because I had to catch a flight out of El Paso back to Pennsylvania," he said. "I got back, and my report was that this area needs further investigation."

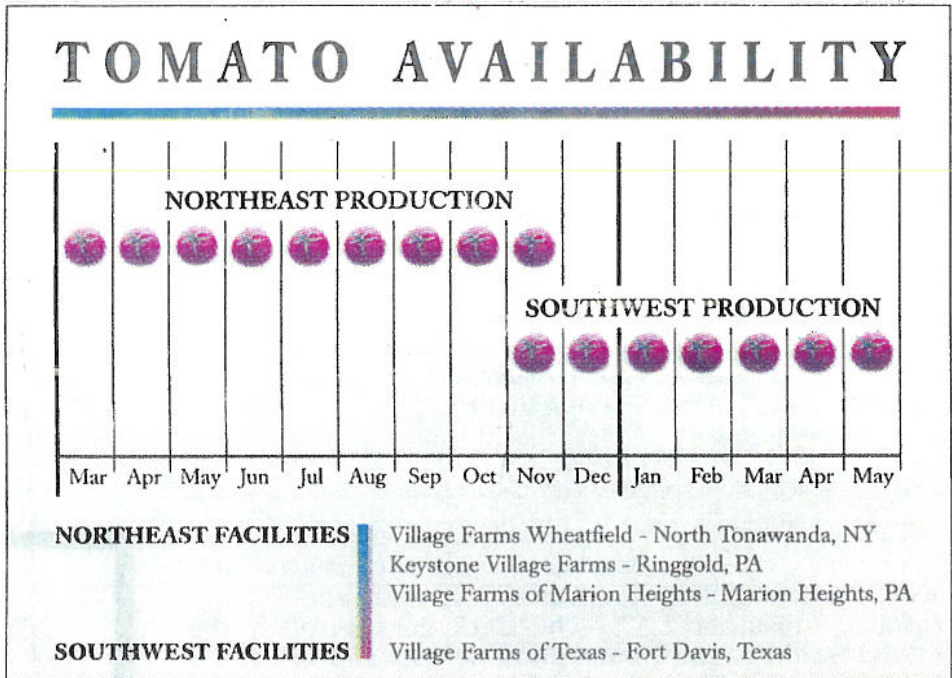
Behen obtained 30 years worth of climate information from the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department to help make the determination.

"I looked at that and knew the climate was right," he said.

The next step was to see how much water was available in the semi-arid region that averages about 15 inches of rain each year.

It would take a lot of water to grow the plants in a semi-hydroponic system covering 40 acres.

Test wells were drilled, and the



Source: Village Farms Headquarters

S-T Graphic by Janie Hotchkiss

information was studied by both the Texas Water Board and a private hydrologist. The verdict: enough water was available for the endeavor.

Totaling millions of gallons of water use each year, Behen said the operation still would use less water than a 40-acre center-pivot irrigation system in a year.

Behen said a recirculation sys-

tem will be used to collect water the plants don't use. That will be put back into the irrigation system. He also said a rainwater collection system would be used to conserve water when possible.

"To the best of our ability, we will try to recharge that aquifer," he said, talking about the underground water source they will use to grow the tomato plants.

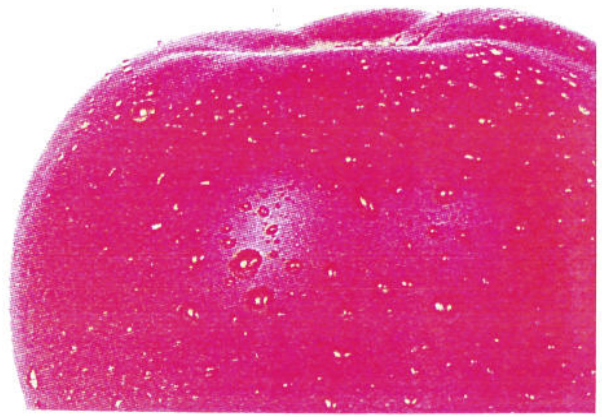
NUTRITIONAL VALUES

Serving Size.....	1 Medium
	5.3 ounces (150 grams)
Calories.....	35
Protein.....	1 gram
Carbohydrate.....	6 grams
Fat.....	1 gram
Sodium.....	10 milligrams
Potassium.....	360 milligrams
Dietary fiber.....	1.5 grams

Source: Produce Marketing Assoc.

Citizens were concerned mostly about the water-use issue and the kind of employees the company would hire, said Kim Little with the Fort Davis Chamber of Commerce.

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"A lot of people were afraid the company would hire illegal workers from Mexico," she said. "We had a town meeting, and the guys (from the company) went out of their way to be there, and they answered questions they didn't have to.

"The company is the cleanest anyone could ask for, and the employees are going to be well-qualified, well-trained workers. I think they are going to fit right in."

Behen stressed that the company was interested in the facility on a long-term basis.

"These buildings have a 30-year life expectancy," he said, pointing to the greenhouse frame under construction. "Our commitment to this area is longer than that.

"Would we make that kind of investment if there wasn't enough resources to support the business?"

Village Farms isn't just interested in water conservation issues. Behen said the operation also will be sensitive environmentally in other areas. Village Farms will not use pesticides, Behen said.

Instead, they will use a tiny wasp that helps control populations of white flies, a major pest in tomato operations.

Named *Encarsia formosa*,

Behen was concerned the term "parasitic wasp" would concern residents in the area. He took a piece of paper and put a dot on it with a pencil.

"They aren't any bigger than that," he said, pointing to the speck on the page.

The wasp acts similarly to the *Catolaccus grandis*, which is being researched as a boll weevil control in cotton.

The adults lay eggs on leaves where white fly grubs are present. When the wasp hatches, the larvae eats the white fly larvae.

Behen also said the company will use bees to pollinate the tomato plants.

Material from the boilers at the greenhouse also will be recycled, Behen said. The exhaust, which contains carbon dioxide, will be scrubbed to extract the gas tomato plants use to produce energy. The carbon dioxide will be fed to the plants.

Village Farms is planning to hire about 200 employees, both full time and part time, ranging from management positions to labor and maintenance. And they plan to hire residents from Fort Davis, Marfa or Alpine or other communities within a close proximity.

"We go to a lot of trouble to hire local people," Behen said. "We will bring in trained people from the company to train these people, and when we think the operation is going well, we will move the trainers to another project."

Of the total 6 billion pound

tomato production in the United States, the greenhouse-grown variety accounts for about one-tenth of 1 percent of that. But Behen said the future of the fruit is in greenhouses.

"Our tomatoes taste like garden tomatoes," Behen said. "The acreage of greenhouse tomatoes is going up slowly and taking a niche in the market.

"They are more expensive, but people are demanding quality."

Behen said he and other employees of Village Farms will strive to fit into the community like anyone else.

"We are a hometown company," he said. "That is the nature of our business.

"I like to walk into Fort Davis and be a part of the community. I don't isolate myself out here. We want to sponsor teams, whether it's little league, pony league, T-ball, whatever they might have here."