

The Packer

Jaws drop for U.S. shippers at Fruit Logistica

By Chris Koger

(Feb. 13) BERLIN — First-time attendees of Fruit Logistica said they were overwhelmed by the immensity of the exposition — five new halls were opened for a total of 25 during the Feb. 7-9 show — but they stressed there were plenty of opportunities to meet with potential exporters and importers throughout the globe.

“My jaw dropped,” said Will Steele, president and chief executive officer of Frontera Produce Ltd., Edinburg, Texas, about his reaction when he first entered the exposition at Messe Berlin, a sprawling complex of connected buildings.

Steele attended Fruit Logistica to find potential European buyers of pineapples grown by his company’s plantation in Isla, Mexico, and later visited port facilities in Rotterdam, where the fruit would be off-loaded.

Regardless of whether U.S. companies export to or import from other countries, they would benefit from seeing a multitude of products, packaging and services from more than 100 countries, he said.

“Our purpose here is to learn about the European market and look for opportunities outside the United States,” Steele said. “I would encourage every American company to come and see the show.”

More than 50,000 attendees — a 16% increase over 2007 — could browse fruits, vegetables, packaging and other allied products and services from 68 countries, said Gerald Lamusse, global brand manager for Fruit Logistica.

Twenty-two U.S.-based companies, one more than at the 2007 exposition, exhibited this year.

At the U.S. Apple Export Council booth in the USA Pavilion represented all U.S. apple exporters, with the exception of those in the state of Washington.

“Russia was the country that had the most representatives looking to open up new business with U.S. exporters,” said Jim Allen, president of the Fishers-based New York Apple Association. “After meeting with so many different interested countries, it is hard to imagine an apple glut in the world. We were very surprised at the level of interest for apples.”

Lamusse said Fruit Logistica offers attendees an unparalleled overview of the worldwide fresh produce trade.

“It enables trade professionals to find suppliers and new products, spot emerging trends and network with people from around the world,” he said.

In some cases, new trade agreements and changing phytosanitary requirements have opened doors to potential U.S. imports. Thailand, for example, can now export six tropical fruits, if irradiated: longans, lychees, mangoes, mangosteen, pineapples and rambutans.

River Kwai International Food Industry Co. Ltd., Bangkok, started exporting mangoes to SSK Produce Inc., Los Angeles, in January, said chief operating officer of fresh produce Soonthorn Sritawee. Only two representatives of U.S. companies approached Sritawee during Fruit Logistica, but he said the irradiated fruit deal, approved by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in July, is still new.

Boonmee Wongshotisatit, president of Asia Exotic Corp. Ltd., Pathumtani, Thailand, also said interest was low for exports to the U.S. at his booth.

David Blumberg, chief executive officer of importer Merex Food Corp., Yonkers, NY, was from one of the two U.S. companies that dropped by the Asia Exotic booth.

Blumberg said the lack of volume of irradiated fruit from Thailand is limiting prospects for imports, but Fruit Logistica still paid off at his first time there. Although Merex has imported produce from Europe since 1984, some of those business contacts have dropped off in recent years. Fruit Logistica gave Blumberg the chance to renew relationships with former trading partners and forge relationships with potential suppliers.



"I made some deals," he said after the show. "I'm very happy — they do this right. It's intense, it's serious, it's nine hours (daily) of nothing more than meeting people and looking for new ideas."

Some companies used Fruit Logistica to test the waters for new products and new markets.

Ripesense Ltd., Auckland, New Zealand, has used its labels (which change color as fruit ripens) on pears in the U.S., and has now formulated a label for avocados. That label is being tested in Europe and New Zealand, but the next stop is the U.S., said Cameron McInness, chief executive officer.

"The ripened product (avocados) on store shelves has improved dramatically in recent years," McInness said. "But this is adding value to a ripening program."

Juan Jose Ley, general manager of Nogales, Ariz.-based Del Campo Supreme Inc.'s Culiacan, Mexico, operations, said he was impressed by tomato seed innovations on display. He also spent time looking at the variety of packaging used around the globe.

"The European equipment and packaging is the best" he said. "There is so much variety in packaging. Also, the whole tomato category is larger and more interesting here."

Cutting-edge processing and packing line equipment, such as Middelfart, Denmark-based MPN's "vegetarian robots," was also on display. Lukasz Zymła, MPN Eastern Europe sales manager, said the equipment can be programmed to pack, move and palletize containers.

Although the equipment is used primarily in Spain and Denmark, Zymła said several growers from the U.S. asked him about automation for fruit harvesting, because of labor shortage concerns.