



## Panel discusses food safety, supplying schools

By Tom Karst

Published on 01/26/2011 09:12AM

SONOMA, Calif. — Worries about implementing the new food safety law and the proliferation of social responsibility audits were hot topics at a panel discussion with United Fresh Produce Association's board members representing different market segments.

“(The small farm exemption) was the one topic that really got out blood pumping,” said Will Steele, president of Edinburg, Texas-based Frontera Produce Ltd.

Steele, vice chairman of the United Fresh grower-shipper board, and other members of the supply chain talked about the exemption, outlined in an amendment to the food safety bill. The amendment, from Sen. Jon Tester, D-Mont., exempts smaller growers from some of the bill's mandates.

The grower-shipper board is considering how to proceed with implementation of the food safety law despite the industry's opposition to the Tester amendment.

The Jan. 19 discussion during United Fresh winter leadership meetings was open to the trade media before closed-door board meetings.

United Fresh president and chief executive Tom Stenzel, who moderated the roundtable discussion, said the association lobbied hard against the Tester amendment.

“With the new Congress coming in, that's going to be a high priority, to try to address that and get it fixed,” Stenzel said.

“Our hope is that we'll drag the small guys along with us and they will understand the importance of food safety,” Steele said.

Buyers have the responsibility to make sure the produce they purchase is safe, said Mitch Smith, director of U.S. quality systems, agricultural products for McDonald's USA and chairman of United Fresh retail and foodservice board. Still, he said the association needs to keep lines of communication open to Congress on the issue.

“Unless growers have a food safety system in place, they won't get the business from the large restaurant chains,” Smith said.

### School resources

Figuring out best practices for supplying schools with fresh produce was the focus of talks by the United Fresh wholesaler-distributor board, said board chairman Brendan Comito, chief operating officer for Norwalk, Iowa-based Capital City Fruit.



“We talked about (creating) a school foodservice advisory board,” Comito said.

Another possibility the wholesaler-distributor board explored was the creation of a “resource guide” to help produce companies supply schools. Another offshoot of that idea is to get school district officials who are successfully sourcing fresh produce to lend their expertise to other schools.

The increasing use of social responsibility audits is a concern to some grower shippers, Steele said. For that reason, he said the United Fresh grower-shipper board will push for standardization of the audits. United Fresh members also talked about the need for confidentiality agreements in relation to those audits to protect sensitive employer-employee information.

“As hard as we are working now on the (good agricultural practices) harmonization effort, let’s see if we can get ahead on this one and see if there are some industry standards (we can put in place),” Stenzel said.

Fresh-cut leaders are looking how they can reinvigorate the category, said Ron Midyett, chief executive officer for Apio Inc., Gudalupe, Calif., and chairman of United Fresh’s fresh-cut and processor board United Fresh.

“We’ve built the business on the virtue of convenience,” he said.

The fresh-cut category may be fighting perceptions that value-added produce is not as sustainable and environmentally friendly as whole produce.

“We need to be out front of that and be telling our positive story,” he said.

Midyett said that value-added produce saves on transportation because it is 100% usable and results in less waste being shipped across the country.

Midyett said the industry needs to continue to work on innovation and laying the groundwork for the next big category development.