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Award honors Frontera president's U.S., Mexico presence

Published on 03/31/2011 04:18PM By Chris Koger



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The Packer editor Greg Johnson, left, names Frontera Produce president Will Steele as the first recipient of The Packer's Importer of the Year Award at the America Trades Produce Conference in McAllen, Texas. Fruit and vegetable industry representatives from the U.S. and Mexico are attending the March 30-April 1 conference.

company.”

After accepting the award, Steele credited those leaders with making the company what it is today and said he's not being humble when he says they're smarter than him.

“I get credit for a lot of things in our organization, but the only credit I should be given is my ability to pick out the best people.”

In the past year, the company continued to grow, expanding onions and watermelons by acquiring the assets of Borders Melon Co., partnering with Arizona grower Santa Rosa Produce on melons, opening an office in the Cincinnati area and launching a new website.

For the most part, however, Frontera growers have been with the company for many years.

“Everything is about longevity and relationships in this business,” Steele said. “It goes back to that — without a good relationship with someone, you have nothing. ... When you look at our grower base and with the exception of one or two, most of them have been with us 17, 18, 19 years.”

McALLEN, Texas — Will Steele, **The Packer's** first Importer of the Year award recipient, didn't take the direct route to the industry like most second- or third-generation children joining the family company.

After several attempts of trying to convince his son — a state policeman with a goal of joining the Federal Bureau of Investigation — to join Frontera Produce Ltd., founder Jim Steele prevailed.

But even with the detour into law enforcement, Will Steele, now president of Frontera, Edinburg, Texas, quickly gained an understanding of production in the U.S. and Mexico. As Frontera expanded acreage and commodities in Mexico, it gained a reputation for treating growers fairly.

Packer Editor Greg Johnson, who announced the award March 31 during the inaugural America Trades Produce conference, said other South Rio Grande Valley industry members credited Will Steele's relationship with growers and an ability to select young, knowledgeable and energetic employees as keys to Frontera's success.

“Our winner today is described as a man of high integrity, one who brings fresh ideas to both his company and the industry, a relationship-builder both with his growers and buyers,” Johnson said. “He's also described as someone who is humble to a fault — one who willingly shares the spotlight with leaders within his

Steele is a member of the United Fresh Produce Association and Texas Produce Association boards.