

# NWA Convention

## Promoting watermelons, food-safety uniformity lifts everyone in industry

BY BRIAN GAYLORD

With much of their watermelon production coming from Mexico, Nogales, AZ-based Al Harrison Co. and Nogales, AZ-based Big Chuy Distributors & Sons Inc. face certain challenges that differ from those faced by Ladera Ranch, CA-based Dulcinea Farms LLC.

Al Harrison Co. and Big Chuy Distributors encounter myriad concerns about the flow of trucks and product across the border between the United States and Mexico. For Dulcinea Farms, which relies on production in various U.S. locations — primarily California — water is a big issue.

But a rising tide lifts all watermelons — or something like that. Generally what's good for the watermelon industry is good for individual companies.

The National Watermelon Association is putting forth food-safety guidelines that apply to watermelons only. The draft won't be finished until March or April and will be inclusive for both imports and domestic watermelons.

"The main focus is to be proactive and have a safe product," said Brent Harrison, president of Al Harrison Co. "It's something we need to do."

Mr. Harrison conceded that many in

the industry already put into practice measures in the proposed food-safety guidelines that are being drawn up. Nonetheless, he said that the guidelines represent a "step up" for the industry. The Good Agricultural Practices published by the United States Department of Agriculture are many years old, he said.

"The end [goal] is to not get anyone sick," Mr. Harrison said.

At present, Mr. Harrison is second vice president of the National Watermelon Association, which works closely on regulations and serves as a voice in the political arena.

Previously, Mr. Harrison was president of the National Watermelon Promotion Board for two years. As the name suggests, the National Watermelon Promotion Board promotes the consumption of watermelons. Part of that promotional message is one of touting watermelon consumption year-round. Easter kicks off the big seasonal promotional dates for watermelons, followed by Memorial Day, the Fourth of July and Labor Day.

Mr. Harrison also serves on the board of directors of the Fresh Produce Association of the Americas.

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## Promotions lift everyone in industry

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Justin Schmidt, director of operations for Dulcinea and a member of the board of directors of the National Watermelon Promotion Board, said that the National Watermelon Promotion Board "promotes solidarity" and works well with the National Watermelon Association.

Mr. Schmidt said that the watermelon industry's efforts to standardize food-safety guidelines is a "must" and that the lack of a standardized, one-audit approach leaves the audit process "cumbersome" as the industry jumps to the various, non-standardized demands of retailers.

The first step is to get the food-safety guidelines accepted within the watermelon industry. Once accepted, those guidelines can then be presented to retailers, Mr. Schmidt said.

Jesus (Chuy) Lopez, owner and general manager of Big Chuy and a member of the board of directors of the National Watermelon Promotion Board, said that his company would have adequate water supply this year but that water shortages in California remain a major concern to agriculture in the state.

Big Chuy Distributors' growing regions in Mexico are in the states of Sonora, Jalisco, Colima and Nayarit.

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