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Dulcinea Expands to New Growing Districts

By Tim Linden

Focus on Locally Grown

Five years into existence as a fresh marketer, Dulcinea Farms has accomplished about 60 percent of what it set out to do in its original five year plan.

That is the assessment of Keith Kato, the company's senior vice president of sales and marketing. He said that percentage of completion does not represent any shortcomings in operations but rather the fact that the company

had a very aggressive five-year plan originally. But Kato does allow that bringing a new product from seed to market is a difficult and time-consuming process, especially when dealing with multiple production areas and multiple growers.

It is well known that Southern California-based Dulcinea Farms was developed from the seed up by its parent company Syngenta, which is a major worldwide seed producer. In a nutshell, Syngenta saw the opportunity to develop unique seed varieties and then keep those seed varieties within their family of companies taking them from field to fork. This opportunity began with a personal-size, seedless watermelon and has expanded to include other specialty melons as well as specialty tomatoes and other products. And Kato said more products are in the pipeline though he wasn't ready to elaborate during an interview in early May. "Look for announcements soon," he promised.

One thing that is well known is that Dulcinea Farms is attempting to capitalize on the local-grown movement by having a very diverse portfolio of production sites. The company says it is committed to expanding production and distribution in response to its customers request for reducing food miles and supporting locally-grown programs. It now has 12 different production areas stretching from coast to coast. Kato said that allows the company to produce its signature products at optimum times in each region and results in quicker and fresher delivery to market.



However, he admits that the concept does come with challenges. On the West Coast where specialty agriculture is the lifestyle and land is still plentiful, finding large lots of land is fairly routine. "In California, you can find one grower with 800 acres, and 100-acre blocks are commonplace. In many other areas, a 25-acre block is the best we can do."

Because Dulcinea puts its own production people on the ground in each of these areas, he said finding good people and managing them from afar is a challenge. But he is confident that the system in place is a good one and the firm is reaping benefits from that system. And if the observers are right and the locally-grown "fad" is truly a long-lasting trend, Dulcinea Farms is very well positioned to take advantage of that.

Dulcinea quotes figures showing that the mini watermelon category grew by 23.54 percent during the 52 week ending March 31, 2008. That is fabulous growth for any item.

Another trend the company is trying to capitalize on is the growth in organics. Kato said Dulcinea is focusing on organics and will be producing organic personal size watermelons in three different production regions this year. He said it does cost more to produce an organic crop in both land and labor costs. The firm does expect to get a premium for that product, but he said for their part, the product is grown, packed and shipped to the same quality specifications as its conventional crop.