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Importers find opportunities in Guatemala

By Jose Escobedo

(March 27, 1:48 p.m.) ANTIGUA, Guatemala — U.S. produce buyers found ample opportunities at this year's Agritrade, Guatemala's biennial produce summit.

The conference and expo, sponsored by Agexport, the Guatemalan Exporter's Association, Guatemala City, was March 19-20.

Roberto Rosenberg, trade commissioner for the Guatemala Trade & Investment Office, New York, said more exhibitors and more products catering to U.S. markets were at the show.

"For the first time we are offering bell peppers, tomatoes, and blueberries. In 2006, these products were not admissible to the U.S.," Rosenberg said. "We had wholesale buyers from New York, New Jersey, Chicago and Canada attend the event."

Rosenberg said Issaquah, Wash.-based Costco Cos. Inc. buyers who attended the show were interested in importing mangoes, blueberries and pineapples.

Mariella Marrero, general manager for the Miami office of Washington, D.C.-based Sun Belle Inc., came to Agritrade to import snow peas, sugar snaps and baby vegetables.

"I have been able to find what I'm looking for, and everyone has been very accommodating, particularly the people from the Guatemalan Trade Office in New York," Marrero said. "They have been very helpful in setting up meetings."

Guatemalan growers and exporters said they had success showcasing their products. Olaf Rasch, director of Guatemala City-based Frutico, said every half hour he had appointments with potential U.S. clients.

"I have met with approximately 20 U.S. buyers and four from Europe," Rasch said. "Our tropical products are hot right now, and mango consumption in the U.S. is increasing tremendously, as well as papaya and pineapples."



Workers separate snow peas in a packing shed for Guatemala City-based Agroalitos S.A., one of Guatemala's largest exporters of snow peas, sugar snap peas and French beans. Last year, the company produced 7 million pounds of snow peas, and exported 5 million pounds of snow peas and 3 million pounds of sugar snaps to the U.S.

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William Watson, executive director of the National Mango Board, Orlando, Fla., came to Guatemala to help the country's mango industry understand what the board is doing on its behalf.

"We had an outreach meeting with mango exporters, researchers and allied industry members," Watson said. "I've talked to a lot of retailers and buyers that are looking for the product."

Many who attended Agritrade attributed its success this year, at least in part, to the venue change from Guatemala City to Antigua. Also, more growers exhibited on the show floor.

"I'm really impressed with the event this year," said Robert Colescott, president and chief executive officer of Southern Specialties, Pompano Beach, Fla. "I think Antigua is a great city."

Colescott has been doing business in Guatemala for 20 years, and since the last Agritrade in 2006, the company has increased its imports from Guatemala by 15%.

Southern Specialties represents 35% of the market share of export volume to the North American market for snow peas, sugar snap peas, beans and baby vegetables, Colescott said. The company also imports Guatemalan mangoes and berries.

Nancy Tucker, vice president of global business development for the Newark, Del.-based Produce Marketing Association, met with Agritrade organizers to discuss Guatemalan exports to the U.S.

"They have very strong goals," Tucker said. "They want to double their exports (from 2007's total) by 2012. They are looking to improve their Agritrade brand, like MexBest."

MexBest promotes foods from Mexico in the U.S. and Canada.

Tucker said PMA considers Central America to be one of the association's next target regions.

"We would be looking to continue our growth here as an important partner for the U.S. trade," Tucker said.

Marcia Mendez, logistics coordinator for Agritrade, said this year's expo focused more on grower-shippers and less on the overall service industry.

"This year 70% of our exhibitors were produce growers and we had 124 booths," Mendez said. "As a result, this was the first time we closed so many business deals in one session."

Agritrade's directors are planning to add more produce varieties.

"For Agritrade 2011, we want to add newer products to our exhibition floor, like fresh okra, asparagus and oriental vegetables," said Estuardo Castro, president of Agritrade.

"We want to offer our clients a bigger diversity of products with better quality and much more quantity," he said.

Agexport paid for **The Packer's** visit to Agritrade.