

Vegetable Day Speakers Encourage 'Store-Door' Relationships

ANDY ANDREWS

Lancaster Farming Staff

NEW HOLLAND (Lancaster Co.) — "It's simply an effort to get buyers and growers together," said Jeff Patton, coordinator for the Pennsylvania Produce Project, begun recently to help vegetable producers throughout the state sell directly to supermarkets.

"These are people you can start a relationship with, a long-term grower-seller relationship," Patton told about 120 vegetable producers and agri-industry representatives on Monday at the New Holland Vegetable Day at Summit Valley Elementary School.

Patton coordinated a special buyer panel featuring one warehouse representative, a produce manager for a large retail supermarket store chain, and the co-owner of a chain.

"We encourage store-door delivery," said Charles Breneman, director of produce for Weis Markets at its Sunbury headquarters.

"The program is near and dear to us," Breneman said that the "Pennsylvania-Proven Produce" label, while relatively new to the state, is an old idea to Weis. "We have embraced it for 40 years," he said. They allow store produce managers to set up store-door delivery from local growers. Weis also purchases produce in bulk from growers at its distribution warehouse.

The produce must meet standard USDA certification requirements, but Weis accepts a wide array of produce, including sweet corn, tomatoes, potatoes, peppers, squash cucumbers, and others. They encourage producers to stop in to local Weis markets and speak directly to the produce managers. Once scheduling and payment

details are worked out, Weis is willing to work on a long-term relationship with the grower.

Breneman spoke to a producer at the Vegetable Day who has been selling directly to Weis for about 18 years.

William Fox, president of Fox's Supermarket with locations in Harrisburg, Middletown, and Hershey, operates medium-sized supermarket stores ranging from 30,000-35,000 square feet. They have operated their independent, family-owned business for 30 years.

Fox's Supermarkets encourages local store managers to deal directly with local producers. Often they purchase produce from Norristown Produce, who deliver six days a week to all three stores.

"Anything they choose will be inspected right on the spot and will pay cash on the spot," said Fox. "The local product is superior to what we get through the warehouse."

Fox, including the other buyers at the Vegetable Day, are looking toward "signature ID" of the produce — putting the grower's name and location right on the produce. All believe it is an excellent selling point. "Pennsylvania-proven produce is almost like a brand name," Fox said.

Robert Van Liew is director of produce for Associated Wholesalers, who operates the wholesale buying business in Robesonia. The company has made it a point to listen to their customers and he told those who want to sell directly to stores that communication is vital.

The business, in operation for 70 years, supplies independent supermarkets throughout Pennsylvania, Virginia, Maryland, and other states. Included are 100



Buyers at the Vegetable Day. From left, Robert Van Liew, director of produce for Associated Wholesalers, who operates the wholesale buying business in Robesonia; Charles Breneman, director of produce for Weis Markets at its Sunbury headquarters; and William Fox, president of Fox's Supermarket with locations in Harrisburg, Middletown, and Hershey.

supermarkets and 200 specialty shops, from mom and pop small-town meat stores to about 800 convenience stores throughout the region. Their system of allocation includes computer time-dated material using PLU stickers.

Van Liew emphasized the importance of developing a work-

ing relationship with local markets. The warehouse offers a special service to growers who have a lot of produce to move.

The buyers can be reached at the following phone numbers: William Fox, (717) 944-7486; Charles Breneman, (717) 742-2406; and Bob Van Liew, (610) 693-3161,

ext. 2203.

At the Vegetable Day, Dr. Tim Elkner, Lancaster horticulture agent, told sweet corn growers that it is important to manage and select for sweet corn varieties that meet customer preferences for either sweet or "corn-tasting."

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