

Wilcox Fresh eyes supply chain efficiencies

BY RAND GREEN

"Given the fact that we do have a tighter supply this year in the [potato] crop as compared to last year," combined with tight truck supplies and rising fuel prices, Wilcox Fresh in Rexburg, ID, is "looking for ways to improve our supply chain efficiencies," Jim Richter, senior vice president of retail relations, said.

The smaller crop and increasing cost of truck transportation is "allowing us to take an introspective look as a company and see what we can do to improve supply chain efficiencies throughout the system as we look to offer the best value possible for our customers," he said. "We are looking at a number of vertical integration projects to try to improve those efficiencies."

Mr. Richter said Nov. 16 that "at this point" he could "not elaborate on those specifically."

One "interesting thing" that is occurring this year in response to rising transportation costs and tighter truck availability, both for Wilcox and for the industry, is that "we are seeing more product going to rail," he said.

"The other thing we are working on is food safety" which "continues to be a strong focus" for the company,

Mr. Richter continued. The Wilcox organization "has always taken a strong position where food safety is concerned, and we are continuing to look at opportunities to improve our food safety program for our customers." Under the leadership of Lynn Wilcox, the company's president, who has made food safety a major part of his mission, the company has been a leader in the industry with regard to food safety, he said.

"In terms of what is new" at Wilcox, Mr. Richter said, "I am pleased to announce that our value-added line, 'Potato Jazz,' is being featured on the television program, 'The Balancing Act,' a women's morning program on the Lifetime Television cable network. David Sherman, a category manager at Wilcox and also the company's corporate chef, "is on the show, and he did a terrific job presenting 'Potato Jazz' to a nationwide audience" on the Lifetime network. The program was scheduled to air Nov. 17 and Dec. 15. It can also be viewed on the company's web site at wilcoxfresh.com.

"Potato Jazz" is a microwavable tray of gourmet fingerling potatoes and baby russet, red and yellow potatoes mixed with flavorful seasonings.

The company has recently

added to its product line a 70-count Idaho baker in a four-count tray in the "Mother Earth" brand, Mr. Richter said. That product is "not new to the industry, but it is new to Wilcox." Introduced at the Produce Marketing Association Fresh Summit in Orlando, FL, in October, the product was well received there as it has been by "our retail customers."

In its marketing programs, Wilcox Fresh has made "a real push" in recent months into social media in order to achieve "the marketing benefits that can come from that," he said. Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have been added to the company web site, and "we are using those tools very aggressively as a company."

Noting that Idaho potato production for the 2010-11 season is down about 14 percent from last year and national production is down about eight percent, "we are definitely seeing strong demand going into the [Thanksgiving] holiday as retailers run heavy bag ad promotions," Mr. Richter said. "I believe you will see that demand stay strong through the Christmas season. And as we get into the heart of the winter months, you will see aggressive promotions from retailers particularly in January and February."