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COVERING FRESH PRODUCE AROUND THE GLOBE SINCE 1897

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## NationFresh emerging as major force in tomato distribution

BY CHRISTINA DiMARTINO

Steve Probstfield, vice president of sales and marketing for NationFresh, headquartered in Lakewood, CO, said that the company has quickly grown into a major force in the tomato industry across the country.

"Our distribution network of national tomato programs puts us in a unique position," said Mr. Probstfield. "We supply superior quality tomatoes to any area of the country, and at all times of the year. Customers have a seamless supply of exactly what they want and when they want it. And, they have the added benefit of working with a strong organization of professionals who can provide the highest possible level of service."

The charter-founding member of NationFresh, Capital City Fruit Co., Inc., in Norwalk, IA, hatched the idea for the company in March 2001. After speaking with numerous other produce companies, including repacking operations across the United States, initial steps were taken to form the company. The first



Steve Probstfield

meeting of the original charter member group was held in December 2002, and the company was officially launched in January 2003.

"The founders realized a void for a nationwide tomato repacking operation that functioned under one umbrella," explained Mr. Probstfield. "There are eight partner-members today, and four co-packers."

The founding members include United Salad Co. in Portland, OR; Colo-Pac Produce Inc. in Denver; Combs Produce Co. LP in Dallas; Capital City Fruit Co. Inc. in Des Moines, IA; Produce Packaging Inc. in Cleveland; Class Produce Group LLC in Baltimore; Peter Condaes Co. Inc. in Boston; and Pacific Tomato Growers Ltd. in Palmetto, FL, and its affiliates, Sunripe Pre-Pak LLC in Mulberry, FL; and Pacific Triple E Ltd. in Tracy, CA.

The four co-packers include Flavor-Pic Tomato Co. Inc., in Birmingham, AL, FreshPoint Tomato in Nashville, Strube Celery & Vegetable Co. in Chicago and Team Tomato in Norwalk, CA.

"I oversee sales for the company from my Missouri location," said Mr. Probstfield. "All founding members are independent family owned companies, and each is involved in the day-to-day operations."

Mr. Probstfield joined the firm in November 2005, after spending two days in retirement from his previous position with Sunkist Growers, where he worked for 36 years. A couple days after he retired, he was contacted by the NationFresh group and accepted the position because he was enticed by its organizational aspects.

"We are currently having discussions about adding other items to the brand name line," he said. "As we expand, we'll move into products like peppers, cucumbers, squashes and others. Today our product line includes every type of tomato, including

round, grape, Roma, cherry and every other tomato variety. If you can call it a tomato, we carry it."

The NationFresh group purchases tomatoes from Pacific Tomato Growers because it is a grower-shipper. Tomatoes come from every growing region both inside the United States and from offshore depending on growing seasons and customers' needs. Product is shipped into each individual facility for repack purposes.

"In order for us to supply retail and foodservice customers with the tomatoes they want, we have to be able to purchase from all growing areas in Mexico, the United States and Canada," said Mr. Probstfield. "We offer all categories, including greenhouse, shade and field grown product. We are also handling organic tomatoes. Pacific Tomato Growers was already handling an organic line, so it was a natural category addition."

Food safety is also made easier for NationFresh because of the stringent rules and criteria that Pacific Tomato Growers must have in place that in order to qualify as a

source.

"That each member and co-packer involved in this operation runs an independent business, food-safety initiatives are tied around the proper protocols," said Mr. Probstfield. "NationFresh has established an expert who runs our internal food safety initiatives. He keeps everyone updated on requirements and changing protocols."

NationFresh's customer profile spans both the retail and foodservice industries. Mr. Probstfield said that on the foodservice side, it sells to major casual dining regional and national restaurant chains. As the company grows, it expects to increase its customer base to all levels and categories in both the retail and foodservice arenas.

"Our operation crisscrosses the nation," he said. "If a company in Cincinnati needs product, I call our Cleveland people, for example. We attempt to source from the closest facility to the customer for logistics, fast service and fresh product delivery purposes. When we need it, and where there's a tomato, we'll find it."