

Essex canner looks to enhance its image with emphasis on quality

Food safety and quality efforts focus on both the farm and the processing plant.

By Jeffrey Carter

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An Essex County tomato canner and its growers will be using 2003 to launch an effort to boost consumer confidence in their products.

They'll be able to show that their field and plant production methods result in safe food and are environmentally sustainable over the long-term.

Bill Thomas, vice-president of Thomas Canning (Maidstone) Ltd., spoke about the program – Sustainable Practices for Processing Tomatoes – at the recent Ontario Processing Vegetable Conference.

Phase one of the effort was launched last year. The 15 growers working with Thomas Canning were given the opportunity to evaluate and fine tune their management practices.

Phase two, being carried out this year, will focus on the plant itself. Again, food safety will be emphasized as well as the long-term viability of the operation.

Phase three will begin in 2003. Consumers will be made aware of the program and how they benefit.

“To improve our competitiveness, we need to brand Canada as a world leader in environmental sustainability and food safety – and also life sciences,” Thomas says.

“The knowledge and information about how the product was produced is important. We need a system to pass that information on to the consumers. They need to feel involved.”

The grower portion of the program identifies the various fields where tomatoes are being grown. The rotation, nutrient management strategy, water management strategy, site selection, pest management strategy, scouting program, and other factors are all detailed, rated and recorded.

Thomas says he already has confidence in the growers that deliver to Thomas Canning. The program is viewed as an added support which also provides quality assurance.

“It's not a document about the details...It's about putting out what the best practices are and pointing the growers in the right direction,” he says.

Thomas doesn't feel the Utopia (and other label) canned tomatoes and tomato juice produced by Thomas Canning will sell for higher prices because of the program.

However, the program may result in increased consumer confidence and increased demand.

With those things come larger sales volumes and more acres for growers.

Sustainable Practices for Processing Tomatoes is a collaborative effort between Thomas Canning and the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs. Working on the project were: Anne Verhallen, Heather Griffiths, Leslie Huffman, Ed Tomecek and Thomas.

Funding came through the agricultural Adaptation Council, Thomas Canning, and the Ontario Processing Vegetable Growers.

Thomas Canning is taking another step to differentiate some of its product. The facility is now certified as an organic processor and is looking to market organic tomato product from 25 acres of organic tomatoes grown near Chatham.

Thomas, who operates Thomas Canning with his brother and a cousin, says the marketing end of the organic effort needs more work. To his knowledge, there are no other organic tomato products being produced in Canada.