



SUCCESS STORY

Salvadoran vegetable exporter makes top food safety grade

During the past 20 years, Del Tropic Foods, a frozen vegetable processor that sells mainly to US-based food distributors, established a reputation for exporting high-quality frozen products. Buyers, however, started pressuring Del Tropic to obtain HACCP certification to meet international food safety requirements and consumer demand.

In 2004, Del Tropic enlisted the help of USAID to help them work toward that goal. Promoting the highest food quality safeguards, USAID's Processing Prerequisites Program, currently implemented by USAID's Agricultural Development Program (ADP), focuses on training and technical assistance to improve a company's Good Manufacturing Practices and to help them meet the stringent prerequisites necessary for HACCP certification, which enables them to stay competitive and increase earnings.

Using USAID's guidance as a springboard, Del Tropic invested more than \$380,000 during the next three years to improve their facilities and train their staff. The company built new hand-washing stations for employees, cleaned and sealed walls to reduce dust, and incorporated other plant and employee hygiene measures.

The effort paid off. In October 2007, USAID-ADP's consultant, the American Institute of Baking (AIB), awarded the company an audit rating of "Excellence" for their implementation of Good Manufacturing Practices. Earning 800 points during the audit, Del Tropic achieved one of the highest possible grades under AIB's internationally recognized auditing procedures.

"When AIB first audited us in 2004, we only had one storage area for everything. That's where we stored replacement parts, equipment, packaging materials and our chemicals, but today we have five different storage rooms for each type of item," said Del Tropic Quality Control Manager, Emperatriz Morales.

But adjustments in staff mentality were much more challenging than plant changes.

"There is one principal reason why the process takes so long – one needs to convince the staff as to what needs to be done," said Del Tropic President, Pedro Urquilla.



Photos by Fintrac Inc.

After being machine-washed and cut, fresh okra travels along a conveyor belt while Del Tropic personnel remove foreign material and sub-grade products before the okra is frozen and packaged.

"Four years ago the company was very different from what it is today. It is satisfying to see that Del Tropic aspires to have a higher standing not only in their level of production but also in the quality of their product. And this is what the program is achieving."

— Rhina Rodriguez, Production Assistant and member of Del Tropic's HACCP team.

Del Tropic trained all plant employees and field workers to wash their hands before handling the product and wear proper gear. Technical workshops and trainings under USAID-ADP are designed to educate and motivate management and staff to follow GMPs. A USAID-ADP food processing specialist also visits Del Tropic weekly to mentor plant employees in meeting HACCP prerequisites.

“Just as important as the improvements in the plant is the training that we received from USAID-ADP,” said Morales. “Without the training we would not have been able to do everything that we have done here.”

Del Tropic is a model student in the USAID-ADP program and has expended extra effort toward training and making their improvements permanent. The company now has a staff member currently being trained to focus full-time on HACCP prerequisites.

“We know that what we are doing is the right thing to do,” said Urquilla. “Maybe we knew before but we did not have the push or the obligation to do it. Entering into this program helped us to carry out these changes.”

In addition to the 120 workers that it employs at the processing facility, Del Tropic sources products from 15 producers of okra and 60 producers of peas, representing more than 6,600 farmhands and 980 hectares under cultivation. Since they produce solely for Del Tropic, the farmers’ and their families’ well-being depend on the company’s success. Fortunately for all involved, USAID-ADP’s Processing Prerequisites Program will help them stay competitive by keeping them on top of international food safety requirements.

USAID-ADP, which started in June 2006, is a three-year project that increases sales, rural incomes and employment, improves farming and food safety practices and boosts Salvadoran exports. The program also links farmers to processors, supermarkets and importers, strengthening the commercial sustainability of El Salvador’s agribusiness value-chain.



To minimize cross-contamination, okra from the field is unloaded outside the processing facility and put on a conveyor belt for a pre-washing.



A woman, left, cleans up near the processing line. Sweeping at the plant is done hourly. At right, plant employees wash their hands before work.



Employees select the highest quality peas.