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**CALIFORNIA TOMATO FARMERS LAUNCH “THE FRESH STANDARD”**

During a conference focused on solutions for the produce industry, a group of California tomato farmers announced the formation of an innovative new organization committed to improved food safety, enhanced quality and finding solutions to the social and environmental issues facing farmers today.

The group, called California Tomato Farmers, is organized as a grower-owned cooperative. Its membership includes California’s most reputable family-farming businesses producing fresh, field grown-tomatoes. California Tomato Farmers operates under what it calls *The Fresh Standard*.

“The Fresh Standard, simply put, is this – when consumers reach for a tomato grown by a California Tomato Farmers member, they are selecting a tomato of the highest quality, grown under the strictest food safety standards and harvested by workers who enjoy a safe and positive work environment,” said Ed Beckman, president of the new organization, based in Fresno, California, who met with several members of the produce trade during the Produce Marketing Association’s *Fresh Solutions* conference in Charlotte, NC this week.

“While it is not unusual for people of ‘like minds’ to come together to form a cooperative, this is the first time farmers have joined together based on quality, as well as a commitment to food safety and social responsibility,” continued Beckman, explaining that California Tomato Farmers has organized under a cooperative structure so that standards for quality, food safety, environmental stewardship and fair treatment of workers can be mandated. These mandates, which are part of *The Fresh Standard* set by California Tomato Farmers, exceed the practices of other tomato growers.

By name, the members of California Tomato Farmers include the following companies: Ace Tomato Company Inc.; The DiMare Company; Gargiulo, Inc.; HS Packing/JTL Produce; Live Oak Farms; Oceanside Produce/Harry Singh & Sons; Pacific Triple E/Triple E Produce and San Joaquin Tomato Growers.

“Members of California Tomato Farmers are proactive in the food safety arena,” said Bill Wilber, of Oceanside Produce/Harry Singh & Sons, a California Tomato Farmers member. “We are forming this organization now because market forces are demanding an immediate and aggressive

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response to this issue. We have organized under a cooperative structure so that we can mandate standards for our members.

“During the 2007 tomato season, all tomatoes produced by California Tomato Farmers members will be required to meet or exceed a new set of standards for food safety,” continued Wilber. “These standards are being developed by combining FDA-accepted good agricultural practices with existing audits required by our customers. To verify compliance with these standards, all members must participate in mandatory, third-party audits of field and packing house practices by United States Department of Agriculture inspectors.”

Wilber further explained that members of California Tomato Farmers have been actively involved in the establishment of industry-wide agriculture and handling practices for fresh tomatoes which were developed with input from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and that the group continues to update and strengthen U.S. and California food safety programs.

Michelle Smith, Interdisciplinary Scientist in FDA’s Office of Food Safety had this to say, “We appreciate the work done by the U.S. fresh tomato industry in developing a clear and meaningful set of standards for good agricultural and handling practices for tomatoes. We look forward to the efforts of this cooperative to continue to improve upon existing standards and to ensure their implementation.”

“Our membership represents nearly 9 out of every 10 fresh market tomatoes produced in California. This is more than enough to fill the needs of every retail and foodservice outlet in North America during our growing season,” concluded Bill Wilber. “We are setting the standard for food safety and making this mandatory for our members now. Our hope is that we can show this is economically feasible so that food safety standards will be adopted by all tomato farmers.”

For now, California Tomato Farmers is focusing on the important issue of food safety, but plans are in the works to develop similar programs and standards for pesticide use and the fair treatment of workers. Helping to oversee the organization’s activities and provide input on these important issues is a diverse advisory panel. This advisory panel includes representatives from government, academia, the produce buying trade, environmentalists, community and consumer activists.

“We are very pleased to see the California tomato industry taking the important issue of food safety seriously and that this group of farmers has come together to ensure a consistent safe supply of tomatoes for us and our customers,” said Geoff Cooney, director of Vancouver-based Ready Fresh Produce, a pre-cut value added supplier and member of the Markon Cooperative. Cooney is one of the industry members who has agreed to serve on the Advisory Panel of California Tomato Farmers.

“I am very happy to have a small part with such a large project,” said Michael Spinazzola, another California Tomato Farmers Advisory Panel member. Spinazzola, President of Diversified Restaurant Systems, which manages produce purchasing for restaurant chains such as Subway, continued, “This effort works in parallel with the direction of industry and the Quick Service Restaurants we service. Developing standards for California tomato growers will help protect our brands and hopefully add value to consumer confidence.”

Members of the California Tomato Farmers who attended the Produce Marketing Association’s

*Produce Solutions* conference this week promise that much more information about the organization will be forthcoming as they make visits to produce buying operations throughout the country and in Canada. A website launch is planned in the near future along with a presentation at the upcoming PMA Foodservice Convention. For more information, please contact Ed Beckman, President of California Tomato Farmers, at their office in Fresno. He can be reached by phone at (559) 261-2630 or by e-mail at ebeckman@mac.com.

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