MARKETING SWEET ONIONS FROM CENTRAL AMERICA

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I began individual discussions of marketing strategies of onions from Central America with Bob Debruyn of DEBCO Produce, Robert Grist of Georgia Vegetable Company, and Kurt Schweitzer of Keystone Fruit Marketing after my first trip to Central America in late March of 1992. In general, most all of the onions from the area have the potential of being "sweet onions"; therefore, we concluded that quality analyses should be conducted on enough of the commercial onions from each area in 1993 to determine their present status toward being "sweet onions". **We realize that many aspects of sweet onion production in the tropics are not known and that much information will need to be developed before the "sweet onion" potential of the area becomes a reality.**

We also began discussion toward the development of a general name, such as **"MAYAN ONION"**, to designate all sweet onions produced in Central America with trademarked brand names such as the "SEBACO SWEETS" or "HIGHLAND SWEETS" to designate sweet onions of specific production areas or marketers. This approach will allow general cooperation among the areas in developing the **"MAYAN ONION"** market for Central America while allowing competition among the areas or growing-marketing groups that is based on the eating quality or pungency of the onions. **SINCE CHEMONICS IS ALREADY INVOLVED IN ONION PRODUCTION IN MOST OF CENTRAL AMERICA, CHEMONICS, WORKING THROUGH ORGANIZATIONS SUCH AS APENN, GREXPAN, ETC., IS IN A POSITION TO MAKE THIS HAPPEN.** It should be fairly easy to coordinate the present marketing efforts needed to accomplish this type of plan among the three buyers that have some present involvement in onion exports from Central America since this communication has already begun. **Under the "MAYAN ONION" program, only onions having a pungency classification of mild or very mild according to PAD assay** (Smittle, ONION WORLD 8(7):20,21,28,29) **could be sold under the MAYAN ONION brand. Such a program would mean that an onion grower might be able to sell one field of onions under the MAYAN brand while onions from another of his or his neighbors fields would have to be sold under another name. The premium pack concept is not new, but developing such a system on this scale is unusual. I believe that the premium pack program MUST be initiated soon if it is to be successful; however, we must be sure that onions having a PAD value of less than 4.2 can be grown in Central America before the program is implemented.** As of January 14, 1993, I have not analyzed a sample of onions from Central America that is this mild. We do not want to implement a program which excludes all onion growers.

With the premium pack **"MAYAN ONION"** program, good quality

control, and marketing based upon quality, we should be able to develop a relatively large market for these sweet onions. No one knows how large this market may be, but we can make some "educated guesses" based on the U.S. market for "sweet onions" produced in Georgia, Texas, and California. I do not have the exact volume of the Texas or California sweet onion production, so I will substitute the volume of onions marketed in Georgia for the other two areas. We sell about 75 million pounds of Georgia's Vidalia onions during a 6 week marketing period (12.5 million pounds per week). Both Texas and California are selling sweet onions during the same period, so we can guess that **the potential U.S. sweet onion market for sweet onions is about 35 million pounds per week.** Excluding the period when sweet onions are available in the U.S. either directly from the field or from controlled atmosphere storage (from about April 15 to November 15, **Central America can have almost exclusive control of the sweet onion market for about 20 to 25 weeks if the quality of the MAYAN ONION is comparable to the sweet onions grown in the U.S.** **The potential U.S. market for sweet onions, without competing with the present sweet onion growers in the U.S., is about 700-800 million pounds or at least 40,000 acres of production.** I suspect that the market for sweet onions in Europe and Asia are at least this large.

Onion varieties which have or can be sold as sweet onions in the United States include at least the following:

Yellow Granex Hybrids: Dessex, Early Yellow Premium, Equanex, Granex 33, Granex 429, Granex 2000, Rio Bravo, Rio Colorado, Special 38, Sweet Georgia, Sweetex, Yellow Granex Hazera, Yellow Granex Improved, Yellow Granex PRR, Yellow Granex 99 PRR

White Granex Hybrids: White Granex, White Granex PRR

Red Granex Hybrids: Red Granex

Yellow Grano: Texas Early Grano 502, Texas Early Grano 502, Texas Grano 502, Texas Grano 502 PRR, Texas Grano 1015Y, Texas Grano 1025Y, Texas Grano 438, Texas yellow Grano 502 Select

White Grano: New Mexico White Grano, White Grano PRR

Red Grano: Red Grano

Although all of the onions listed have been marketed as sweet onions, the pungency of these cultivars may vary widely when grown in the same field. The PAD values of onions from an experimental plot in Georgia ranged from 1.2 for Hybrid Yellow Granex to 3.5 for Texas Grano 1015Y. There is evidence that the pungency changes less with cultural system for some cultivars than for others. These and other aspects of sweet onion production have not been clearly defined for climatic and soil conditions in Central America, but the potential is very promising.