

McAllen venture could change way produce is treated

BY JARED JANES
THE MONITOR

A plan to change how millions of boxes of mangoes are treated for the Mexican fruit fly and bacterial contaminants could be a boon for the Rio Grande Valley's growing produce industry.

In August, the U.S. Department of Agriculture lifted a procedural barrier to allow construction along the U.S.-Mexico border of facilities that blast mangoes and other fruits and vegetables with a highly-focused beam of electricity, eliminating pathogens and pests. The USDA's rule change, pushed by the Valley's congressional delegation, should soon bear fruit when McAllen becomes the first city in the Southwest with the technology.

The Valley's E-beam facility could create a competitive advantage for the McAllen metro area as it seeks to gain a larger share of the Mexican produce market. But consumers across the nation could also benefit from a larger array of high quality fruits and vegetables that last longer on the shelf.

Chip Starns, the vice president of Houston-based ScanTech Sciences, said the high-tech procedure will virtually eliminate the chance of pests

and pathogens crossing the border.

"A fruit fly doesn't care where the Rio Grande is," said Starns, whose company also worked to amend the rules prohibiting treatment facilities in Southwest border states. "We were figuring if we could put it on the U.S. side instead of the Mexican side, it would be a great advantage."

McAllen site

With the USDA's permission, ScanTech is now partnering with the McAllen-based Abasto Corp. to build its first plant off 23rd Street and Military Highway. The \$22 million facility, which will eventually employ up to 200 people, will use a non-nuclear alternative to gamma-based irradiation to sterilize fruit and vegetables crossing the border in both directions.

ScanTech has spent more than a decade working on the technology — called electronic cold pasteurization by the company — that it says is vastly superior to the common way to treat produce.

To kill microorganisms, produce was traditionally treated with a gas called ethylene oxide that is being phased out for health and environmental reasons. But a shift to treating produce in hot water baths created its own host of problems, among them a reduced shelf life and lower success in killing contaminants.

ScanTech's technology eliminates both problems by essentially electrocuting the fruit without generating heat. The company says its irradiation method uses less energy,



JOEL MARTINEZ/THE MONITOR

Victor Lopez carries a box of Cognac mangoes from Mexico in a refrigerated storeroom at Cabello produce company in McAllen. These products could be subject to a new sterilization technique.

does not involve dangerous radioactive materials and is as safe to operate as a household microwave.

Irradiation technology, however, was not allowed in Southwest border states over fears they were at too high a risk of fruit fly introduction. That meant mangoes, guavas, pomegranates and other imported produce had to be treated in Mexico using heat before being allowed to cross the border.

But U.S. Rep. Ruben Hinojosa, D-Mercedes, lobbied USDA to lift the prohibition against irradiation facilities on the U.S.-Mexico border as long as safeguards are put in place. Hinojosa said border communities are the perfect place for irradiation facilities because of the high volume of produce crossing from Mexico and other southern countries.

"We are literally on the

front lines of defense in protecting our consumers from pests and contaminations that could endanger our health," Hinojosa said. "It is about protecting our health and our crops, and it is also about creating jobs."

A new option

Lured to Texas from Atlanta through a \$2 million award from the state's Emerging Technology Fund, ScanTech has been planning its first facility for the Valley since arriving in the state in 2009. ScanTech partnered with Abasto Corp., a company catering to produce distributors that has built four terminal markets in South McAllen.

Once fully funded, the E-beam facility will be built behind Abasto's Warehouse Kingdom near the intersection of 23rd and Military.

As the first fruit sterilization of any type in South Texas, the E-beam facility can draw growers' attention to the Valley as a viable shipping route, said Keith Patridge, the MEDC's executive director. Mexico's construction of the Mazatlan-Durango highway, a \$1.5 billion engineering marvel that directly connects fertile farmland in western Mexico to population centers in the northeast United States, is expected to make the Valley a center of produce shipment.

But it could also attract more interest from U.S. farmers whose peaches and berries can't be exported to Mexico without similar treatment. The MEDC is also exploring whether the irradiation technology could be used to sterilize medical equipment produce in Reynosa maquiladoras.

"With the new move-

ment of produce (along the Mazatlan-Durango Highway), it gives us a better package to offer to the growers and shippers in Mexico to use this port of entry," Patridge said. "It may also result in additional southbound traffic that generates more business and more warehousing distribution facilities."

Abasto officials say the E-beam technology will also greatly improve produce quality and technology.

This week, California public health officials began investigating a salmonella outbreak traced in part to tainted mangoes shipped from Mexico. The E-beam technology would eliminate more than 99 percent of food-borne pathogens.

'Wave of the future'

The E-beam treatment process reduces spoilage and maintains flavor lost in the hot water baths, said Fernando Narvaez, Abasto's business development director. Mexican growers will also be able to ship produce currently prohibited in the U.S. unless treated with irradiation, including guavas, pomegranates, sweet limes and manila mangoes, a major Mexican crop that reacts poorly to the hot water treatment.

"They're not satisfied with what the current treatments do to the quality and characteristics of the fruit," said Elio Botello, Abasto's president and founder. "Hot water treatment is going to disappear. This is the wave of the future."

"Growers and packers know this is the way to go."

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