



SWEETPOTATO PRODUCTS: Jose Calderon (left) and Johnny Barnes show off some of the varieties of products and packaging marketed by Farm Pak Products Inc. in Nash County, N.C. Farm Pak ships a considerable amount to the European Union each year.

Sweetpotato grower wants NC processors

By MICHAEL BRANTLEY

AFTER winning a prestigious award, it would be easy to sit back and enjoy the recognition.

But farm companies don't have time to do that, and that's part of what earned statewide recognition for Barnes Farming Corp. and its marketing arm, Farm Pak Products Inc. of Nash County.

The North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services recently named Farm Pak as the 2009 Exporter of the Year. The company is the largest grower, packer and shipper of sweetpotatoes in the world.

"An exporter of fresh sweetpotatoes faces many challenges," says Steve Troxler, N.C. agriculture commissioner. "But Farm Pak has crossed those hurdles by planting a variety of sweetpotato that has a longer shelf life and by providing a consistent year-round supply from environmentally friendly storage facilities."

The variety Troxler refers to is known as the Covington, named after Dr. Harry Covington, a former professor at N.C. State University. Covington worked with Barnes Farming for five years after he retired from teaching.

"It has an extended shelf life, so we can ship it to Europe,"

Key Points

- Farm Pak Products Inc. earns Exporter of the Year award.
- Barnes Farming is world's largest sweetpotato grower.
- VP Johnny Barnes says state needs ag processing facilities.

says Johnny Barnes, vice president of Barnes Farming. "We partnered with a company over there that saw the superiority of taste and health benefits to [American] sweetpotatoes over what they had been buying from places like Spain and Israel."

Barnes says a trip Troxler made to Europe in 2006 really shined a light on the potential of the market for local growers.

"We were happy to get nominated, especially with the stiff competition," he says. "There are a lot of folks working hard here. It does give us a level of credibility with our customers ... And it gives a pat on the back to our workers."

Barnes says his company took a risk by investing \$250,000 up front to market its product. Over time, the company got the money back through the USDA.

"Others in North Carolina did the same thing we did," he says, "and it has proven to be a big economic development for sweetpotatoes in this state."

Historically, the sweetpotato has been a fresh-market



ORANGE STANDARD:

Europeans have shown a preference for North Carolina sweetpotatoes for appearance, health benefits and taste.

product sold to grocery stores and chains, with the off grades going to canning facilities. There was a short selling season.

"It used to end at Easter, and you wanted to be sold out by then," Barnes says. "But in the 1980s, we had some bumper crops and we — as well as other growers — installed refrigeration to extend shelf life. All of sudden, sweetpotatoes became available year-round. At that point, the food-service vendors and restaurants could carry them. They didn't want

something unless they could get it year-round."

Dearth of processors

That growth, while a great thing for North Carolina agriculture, brought a problem to light.

"There is a dearth of processors in this state," Barnes says. "I think there are three canners of sweetpotatoes [here] now. Production is going to move where the growth is ... the Midwest and the Northwest are now growing near the major processors."

Barnes would like to see an agricultural initiative to help relieve the situation.

"At the very least, we need a dehydration plant. That would add a lot of products," he says. "If we could just get something here to help with french fry production, we could create some growth and a lot of jobs."

Barnes Farming is an investor in Yamco, a processing facility in Snow Hill, N.C. It's not just about canning these days. Frozen and pureed stock is cooked and packed for shipping.

"Sweetpotatoes can go to baby food companies, the

military, even famine relief," Barnes says. "The demand is growing so much that if one of the big food chains wanted to offer these as a product, there aren't enough sweetpotatoes to handle it."

Barnes adds that the investment in agricultural processing facilities would reach outside the state's borders, too.

"Florida could ship here, for example," he says. "Freight is a bigger cost all the time. We're shipping to the West Coast, then they are shipping back to the East Coast to be consumed. There's not only cost involved, it's also not very green."

The company has about 60% of its acreage in Edgecombe County, with the rest divided between Nash and Wilson counties. It has more than 5,000 acres in sweetpotatoes and another 7,000 acres in soybeans, wheat, peanuts, cucumbers, squash, peppers and tobacco. They grow both flue-cured and burley tobacco.

Part of the product line includes organic tobacco (mostly sold to Santa Fe in Oxford, N.C.), organic sweetpotatoes (mostly for export), as well as organic soybeans and wheat.

Barnes Farming has 120 employees; the sweetpotatoes alone account for over 1 million bushels of production. That's a long way from how things started in 1962.

That year, company president Carson Barnes, Johnny's father, planted one-third of an acre of sweetpotatoes. In the late 1970s, the company started exporting to London until exchange rates turned negative. They got back into the market largely due to the development of the Covington.

"[To trade with] the European Union," Johnny Barnes says, "you have to be certified annually in pesticides, fungicides and herbicides. Recently, they contacted our foreign sales manager and technical adviser about a residue they found. We had to stop using the standard fungicide in the industry. It is a headache, but it's also an opportunity."



YEAR-ROUND PRODUCTION: The conveyor belt is always running in the sweetpotato business these days, thanks to new varieties and storage methods.