

# THE PRODUCE NEWS

COVERING FRESH PRODUCE AROUND THE GLOBE SINCE 1897

## **Mexican mangos may be out of hot water**

by Tim Linden

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By this time next month, mangos from Mexico should be arriving in the United States without having to undergo a hot-water treatment process that many feel compromises the quality and flavor of the fruit.

An irradiation facility in the Mexican state of Hidalgo has applied for certification from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and expects to be shipping irradiated mangos to the United States by mid-April.

The irradiation process will be conducted in Hidalgo at a Sterigenics International plant. Sterigenics International is an Oak Brook, IL-based firm that bills itself as the "global leader in contract sterilization services." It operates dozens of facilities around the world offering a variety of different sterilization processes, including ethylene oxide as well as gamma and electron beam irradiation. It operates in a number of industries, including sterilization services for medical devices and pharmaceutical products.

Cesar Moreno, general manager of the Sterigenics plant in Hidalgo, said that the facility has been irradiating guavas and shipping them to the United States since October. He noted that the Hidalgo facility mainly works in the food industry, with the irradiation of spices, such as chili powder, as the top products brought through the facility.

"Once we are certified by USDA, we expect to irradiate five to seven loads of mangos per week for about 40-45 weeks," he said.

Mr. Moreno said that this would result in more than 1 million cartons of irradiated mangos being sent to the United States over the next year. The plant has done extensive testing with irradiation, and he believes that it is much better for the fruit than the standard hot water treatment that currently is used by packers that send fruit to the United States.

At this point, all Mexican, Central American and South American packers of mangos destined for the United States must follow USDA guidelines for treating that fruit to ensure that harmful pests do not enter the United States with the fruit. Typically, that involves a laborious hot-water treatment that entails submersing the fruit in hot water for 45-90 minutes (depending upon the temperature of the water) and then holding the fruit for an extended period to make sure that no damaged fruit makes it into the boxes.

While most packers have become experts with this procedure, it is costly and requires that the fruit be picked at an earlier stage of ripeness.

Irradiation is a legitimate option that has been approved by the USDA's Animal & Plant Health Inspection Service, but it has been used sparingly, most recently for a very limited supply of mangos from India.

Melissa O'Dell of APHIS confirmed that the agency did receive an official letter from a Mexican irradiation facility in early March requesting certification for the irradiation and shipping of mangos. Although she could not identify the facility, there was little doubt that it was the Sterigenics operation.

She said that the plant was already "up and running" with an APHIS inspector on-site, so approving the facility for mangos required only clearing a few technical hurdles. She added that APHIS had to determine how it would logistically handle the on-site certification, and then the official request would most likely be granted within a matter of weeks.

A week later, Mr. Moreno said that it appeared that the APHIS inspectors in charge of certifying the work on guavas would provide the same service for mangos. He explained that it takes about an hour-and-a-half to irradiate a truckload of mangos from the time the truck enters the facility until the load has completed the irradiation process and is ready to hit the road again.

He said that once the load arrives at the facility, the mangos are off-loaded and placed in aluminum totes, each of which can hold 60 10-pound mango cartons. The aluminum tote is exposed to the irradiation for a very short time and then the mangos are reloaded onto the truck.

When the load is finished and certified by the APHIS inspector, the truck is sealed, and the seal cannot be broken until it reaches the United States. Mr. Moreno said that the boxes themselves are a bit different than the standard mango cartons, as they must include a fine mesh screen that prevents insect infestation in the short time between being exposed to the irradiation and being loaded back onto a truck destined for the United States.

A handful of U.S. mango importers interviewed by The Produce News were excited about the prospects of examining the irradiated fruit as it comes to the United States, and virtually all agreed that it could help improve the quality of the product presented to U.S. consumers at retail. The only question is whether consumers are ready for irradiated fruit.

Although there are activists who may stir up some controversy with the irradiation process, Mr. Moreno pointed out that U.S. consumers have accepted many irradiated products, including the aforementioned spices, guavas and pharmaceuticals.

Another company, Scantech Mexico, is in the middle of the permit process to build two new irradiation facilities in Mexico.

Jose Navarro Martinez, president of the firm, said that if all goes as expected, the facilities, which will be located in the Mexican states of Jalisco and Queretaro, would be operational by the beginning of the 2010 season.

Mr. Martinez said that all requisite testing has been done and the Mexican government is involved in the process, so he anticipates no new roadblocks in the construction and operation of the facilities.

He compared the irradiating of fruit to turning on a flashlight and shining it through a window. He said that the light beam does nothing to alter the glass, just as the irradiation beam will do nothing harmful to the fruit.

Like Mr. Moreno, Mr. Martinez said that the process would help Mexico ship an improved piece of fruit to the United States.

