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Hard white becomes a hard sale
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Layers of success

Key Points

- Peri & Sons of Nevada is one of the world's largest onion farms.
- Food safety is high on agenda for the company.
- Traceability of its crops gives farm an advantage.

By T.J. BURNHAM

NO one was more surprised than David Peri to find his farm was one of the biggest seed-to-store onion operations in the world.

"I just started out trying onions in the high desert of Nevada, and all of a sudden I found myself probably the biggest grower in the nation," he says. "Kind of crept up on me!"

Today, the multimillion-dollar Peri & Sons Farms Inc. of Yerington, Nev., has expanded to include more than 250 full-time workers (1,200 at the peak of harvest), 7,500 acres and a year-round supply to the marketplace, thanks to a state-of-the-art farm and shed in Firebaugh, Calif.

Some key people have been on board for 30 years. Many workers stay due to the company's full-paid insurance premiums, 401(k)s and housing, as well as company cars.

Early expectations

Peri's early goal was to grow 500 acres of onions, along with hay and green vegetables.

Well beyond that expectation, Peri now runs a major production-packing business linked to onions, a crop he



UNDERTAKING ONIONS: Yerington, Nev., onion producer David Peri says getting workers for his labor-intensive crops is becoming more challenging. His crops are all manually harvested.

picked early on. "I like the versatility and shelf life of onions," he says. The onion sector, focused on white, yellow, red, sweets and organic, now dominates Peri & Sons, with 1,700 acres handled through the California plant and 2,500 via Yerington.

One of the prime drivers of his farm today is to ensure food safety, and Peri & Sons is

considered a template operation for guaranteeing produce purity from field to consumer.

A third-generation farmer, Peri represents a family ag tradition reaching back nearly 100 years. In 1912, his grandfather Constantino Peri with his brothers, Sabatino and Bruno, arrived from Italy, after marrying three sisters. They leased 50 acres of land near Dayton,

Nev. In 1976, David Peri came to Yerington to launch his own farm venture, providing premium, commercial and No. 2 grade onions. The produce was delivered within the U.S., as well as to Canada, Mexico, the Pacific Rim, Central America, Europe and Australia.

A fourth generation is already busy working for the company, with daughter Jessica

heading up the sales division.

"In today's farming, we have to continually look for new efficiencies," Peri says. "The scale of our operations has helped improve efficiency, since we can use the same equipment over a six-month period." Harvest in California runs through the middle of this month, and Yerington geared up about Sept. 20.

Everything is drip-irrigated, except for a few furrow-watered acres in an El Centro production region. "A little bit of water is necessary often for onion, since they're a shallow-rooted crop," explains Peri.

Tracing the crop

While Peri & Sons is a landmark onion producer and packer, it is the company's heritage of providing fine-tuned traceability of the crop that stands out in the industry. "Food safety has been changing tremendously," Peri says.

Because of higher buyer demand for traceability, competition from foreign buyers, such as Peru, could be reduced, he believes, due to difficulties in tracing crops planted abroad. His competition domestically is primarily from Arizona, New Mexico and Georgia for the California harvest, and Idaho, Oregon and Washington for the Yerington pick.

■ For more on Peri & Sons, see related story on Page 16 and find out more about its traceability program on our website at www.FarmProgress.com.

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Crop Management

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Key Points

- Nevada onion grower brings robotics to packing line.
- Labor shortages and food safety are prime concerns at Peri & Sons.
- Food traceability effort costs company about \$300,000 yearly.

By T.J. BURNHAM

‘WE’VE already established state-of-the-art packing in our Firebaugh, Calif., sheds, and we’ll be moving that technology into our sheds here in Yerington, Nev.,” says David Peri, Peri & Sons producer.

Peri & Sons is one of the world’s largest producers, packers and shippers of onions.

“Once we begin sorting [in California], nobody touches the product through its wrapping and palleting,” he says. Driven in part by the difficulty in finding seasonal labor, the robotic sorting system is also a key element in the company’s bid for greater food safety, says Peri.

“We plan to completely automate all of our Yerington packing,” he adds.

Labor is a “huge political issue” for farms, he says. “I don’t think politicians understand what growers are up against when it comes to hand labor.” Peri & Sons hires nearly 1,000 workers seasonally for weeding and harvest.

“The only way we’re going to keep food cheap in the U.S. is with some help on the worker problem,” he adds. “I don’t think anyone in Washington, D.C., really knows what the problems are in getting agricultural labor.”

While labor is a major headache for the produce company, decreasing use of pesticides for greater consumer comfort is an abiding and major thrust, says Peri.

“By using drip irrigation in nearly all of our crops,” he says, “we’re not adding to a fungal environment in the crop. We’re having really good luck controlling our foliage disease with drip, which also allows us to reduce our use of fertilizers and other chemicals.”

But the biggest challenge is in weeding, particularly in the organic crops where herbicides cannot be used, he adds. “We have a crew of about 200



TRACING THAT ONION: Peri & Sons of Yerington, Nev., will soon be able to trace who picked onions like this in what row, says Teri Gibson, marketing director.

people in the summer just to do the weeding,” he says. Onions, among produce crops, offer some of the most difficult weeding challenges, he says, since they do worse than most crops in competition with weed growth.

In one 85-acre block of onions in California, Peri spends about \$2,000 an acre for hand weeding, and weeds are still present at harvest.

Less weed seed

Using only well water in the Yerington plantings, weed control is less of a challenge since the underground moisture source does not carry as many weed seeds to the field, he notes.

Making sure the product is traceable and free of any pesticide residue may require costly extra management at Peri & Sons, but it makes Teri Gibson’s job a lot easier as marketing director, she says.

“Pushing the deadline to meet pending new federal regulations, so we have remained ahead of the loop here at Peri & Sons, has impressed our buyers,” she says. “Being willing to spend the money and put the time and resources behind this food safety effort keeps our buyers very happy.”

But the clean-food effort has meant money and time for Peri & Sons, she adds. Peri estimates he spends at least \$300,000 a year on the traceability and food safety program at the company.

His wife, Pam, monitors the traceability and food safety program at Peri & Sons and “pushed hard” on this effort early on, he recalls. “We had a few disagreements about spending all that money at first,” he says, “because I saw all my neighbors spending zero on this effort.”

“Now, I apologize to her because today having gone so far, we’re in a far better position to meet the standards that will dictate whether we’ll be able to sell on the marketplace. Safeway, for example, is doing a big audit on these issues right now, and if you don’t meet their criteria, they probably won’t buy from you.”

Being able to tell customers “exactly where our product has been” makes a major difference to our sales, says Gibson. “A lot of packers are shipping in onions from all over the place with no source traceability. When we get to the point — which is our goal — of being able to tell what employee harvested what onion out of what row, all on digital record, it leaves nothing to guesswork.”



LABOR-INTENSIVE BAG: Onions like these at Peri & Sons are all hand-picked, meaning a continued flow of hand labor is critical at the Yerington, Nev., farm, one of the world’s largest onion operations.

■ See our cover story and visit our website at www.FarmProgress.com for more on Peri & Sons.