

# Adams County apple growers look to tap into international markets

*By MARCUS RAUHUT Staff writer*

Local apple growers have been courting importers and wholesalers from Central and South America, Europe and Asia.

Exports represent only a small slice of the Pennsylvania apple industry. But over the past few weeks, trade delegations from around the world have visited orchards in Adams County and other locations along the East Coast.

The most recent delegation arrived this week. About a dozen trade representatives from India, Russia and southeast Asia toured orchards of Adams County, including El Vista Orchards near Fairfield.

They were looking at the quality, color, size, and flavor of the apples, as well as the available varieties.

Before orchard President David Benner led them on a tour of his 500 acres of apple trees, the delegation had a chance to inspect the packing house.

"I'm really impressed with this facility," said Gagan Khosla, who represents an importer from India. "We're looking at the process and trying to see what we can be doing to get a better product."

India bought close to \$1 million in Pennsylvania apples from last year's harvest.

Total apple exports currently make up only about 10 percent of the \$77 million apple industry in the state, according to the Pennsylvania Apple Marketing Program.

Pennsylvania growers primarily sell their apples to processors, but Benner said more orchards -- including his own -- are putting more acres in fresh market produce.

"We've typically been a processing state, but as we switch more toward fresh, this is the perfect opportunity to open new markets," said Karin Rodriguez, executive director of the Pennsylvania Apple Marketing Program.

As economies grow in other parts of the world and the middle class has more disposable income, U.S. goods like apples are seen as luxury items. Many of the foreign buyers were interested in learning about new apple varieties they could sell in their home countries.

"I believe the Russian market is maturing and there are opportunities for new varieties," said Oleg Ivanov, a Russian trade agent. "We want to see if we can find a market for them."

Singapore also represents a potential burgeoning market for U.S. apples.

Francis Chua, an importer from Singapore, said people in his home country are very health-conscious. He came to the U.S. to look for new varieties and study the grading and packing process.

"Some have very advanced technology in the apple industry. I think that's very important for the quality check," Chua said.

Delegates from Mexico, Central America and Brazil came to Adams County and other points in the eastern U.S. at the end of September.

The reverse trade missions were arranged in conjunction with the U.S. Apple Export Council, which is supported by a grant from the USDA and funds from growers.

The delegates toured orchards, packing houses, farm markets and grocery stores in New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia and Michigan. While they were at El Vista Orchards this week, they snapped pictures and asked Benner questions about the different apple varieties and growing practices.

Kristine Marceca, executive director of the U.S. Apple Export Council, said that for many of the buyers on the tour, it was their first chance to see apple production on the East Coast of the U.S.

"We're really happy to build these relationships and build new markets," she said. "If you get a better return on your crops, you can reinvest that. And it's not just the producers, but truck drivers and other jobs."

Benner feels very confident the reverse trade missions will result in more business for his orchard. "The U.S. is in a situation where we're in a trade deficit, and this is a deal where we can get some dollars coming back into the country, as opposed to dollars coming out all the time," he said.

The orchards in Adams County seem to have made an impression on several importers.

"The quality is terrific. They're very delicious," said Angelika Langridge, a marketing specialist for a Russian food marketing company. "I think they're perfect for the Russian market."

According to the USDA, Pennsylvania is the No. 4 apple producer in the country, behind Washington, New York and Michigan. Adams County is the No. 1 apple producer in the state and Franklin County is not far behind.

East Coast producers have the ability to reach European and certain Asian markets more quickly than West Coast producers like Washington, which is the largest fresh apple producer in the U.S. according to the USDA.

Marceca said it takes about 28 days by boat for an apple from the East Coast to reach southeast Asian ports.

Central American markets also present opportunities for East Coast growers like Benner, who just shipped a load of apples to the Dominican Republic.

"There are a lot of bananas and pineapples that come here and they don't want an empty container shipped back," Marceca said. "We look for little opportunities like that. It's like a puzzle. We have

affordable prices, and the more opportunities we create, the more chance you can create a better return for the growers."

-----

Marcus Rauhut can be reached at [mrauhut@publicopinionnews.com](mailto:mrauhut@publicopinionnews.com) or 262-4752.