

People & Places

Winter berries boost U.S. demand

Hector Lujan expands Mexico operations for domestic market

By **TIM HEARDEN**
Capital Press

Hector Lujan enjoyed working on his family's farm in Baja California as a boy, but his main interest going into college was finance. Soon, however, he merged his two interests, and his work in Central Mexico helped establish berries in North America as a year-round fruit and led to his hiring as chief executive officer of the world's largest berry producer.

Better quality, yield

A native of Tijuana, Lujan ran Mexico operations for the Oxnard, Calif.-based Reiter Affiliated Companies, bringing in experts to teach growers cultural practices that improved the quality and yields of winter berries. The resulting availability of Mexican strawberries, raspberries and other berries helped build demand for the fruit during their off-season in the U.S.

"We grew up having summer berries — they were a seasonal item," said Lujan, who became Reiter's CEO on Jan. 1 and lives with his family in Santa Barbara, Calif.

"Berries are, I would consider, the most delightful fruit you can find in the supermarket," he said. "Today people are growing up seeing berries every day. It's great. It's a very delightful fruit that kids pick up as candy. It's healthy candy."

Having earned a bachelor's degree in business administration at the Instituto Tecnológico de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey, Lujan worked several years in the financial sector before joining one of his former professors at Bionova Fresh. The company was a subsidiary of the holding company Grupo Pulsar, and Lujan managed its farming and marketing operations.

One of Lujan's tasks was to defend Mexican growers' interests amid a U.S. tomato dumping investigation in the 1990s. But he went from competing against U.S. growers to joining forces with them by going to work for Reiter in 2002.

Largest producer

With acreage and investments in the U.S., Mexico,



Courtesy of Reiter Affiliated Companies

Hector Lujan has been hired as chief executive officer of Southern California-based Reiter Affiliated Companies, which describes itself as the world's largest berry producer. A native of Mexico, Lujan worked his way up through the company by expanding its reach in the U.S.



Courtesy of Reiter Affiliated Companies

Hector Lujan, left, the newly hired chief executive officer of Southern California-based Reiter Affiliated Companies, stands with executive chairman Garland Reiter.

Portugal and Morocco, Reiter is the world's largest multi-berry producer, growing Driscoll's proprietary varieties of strawberries, raspberries, blueberries and blackberries year-round, according to a news release.

Reiter is a pioneer in farming. The company established the first U.S. private primary health care clinic for farmworkers and collaborated with the University of California to implement obesity and diabetes prevention programs for workers.

"I was very impressed by the company's culture ... their commitment to agriculture, how they ran their business and the people engaged" in it, Lujan said.

Lujan began as vice president of Central Mexico operations for Berymex, a subsidiary, and within three years his territory had expanded to

include all of Mexico. It was then that he helped growers improve their practices.

Mexico expansion

Northwestern Mexico "had been an exporter forever" and knew how to meet the standards of foreign trade partners, but "Central Mexico had not," Lujan said. Farmers there grew for domestic consumption, for which both rewards and investments were small, he said.

Lujan's team taught growers that the more they put into their crops, the greater the reward could be.

"We were getting people to believe you work the ground well, you work the ground deep and you build up a strong plant and get strong yields and great fruit," he said.

Reiter now has more than 100 contract growers in Mexico in addition to its own

farms, and demand for winter berries has exploded. In 2014, the U.S. imported 355.9 million pounds of fresh strawberries valued at \$374.7 million, nearly all of which came from Mexico, according to the USDA Economic Research Service.

Mexico's strawberry production overlaps with Florida's, whose industry has raised concerns about competition. But fresh-market strawberry production in Florida has shown no signs of decline over the years, according to the USDA-funded Agricultural Marketing Research Center.

In 2013, the annual per-person consumption of fresh strawberries in the U.S. reached a record high of 7.9 pounds, according to the ERS.

Lujan moved to the U.S. in 2011, he said. He continued to run Mexican operations as well as those in California and wholly owned farms until 2013, when he became Reiter's chief operating officer.

His promotion to CEO comes as former CEO Garland Reiter moves to the role of executive chairman.

Lujan's work has "allowed him to establish a great depth of knowledge and business acumen for our diverse international business," Reiter said in a statement.

Immigration, trade

As a Mexican citizen helping to run a U.S.-based company, Lujan arrives at what could be a crucial time for ag-



Western Innovator

Hector Lujan

Occupation: Chief executive officer, Reiter Affiliated Companies

Residence: Santa Barbara, Calif.

Family: Wife Beatriz, four children

Website: <http://www.berry.net>

ricultural labor and trade, as President-elect Donald Trump has vowed to curb illegal immigration and renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement and other trade deals.

Lujan believes public attention on these issues could finally produce a comprehensive immigration reform package, he said. He hopes that Trump's use of the H-2A work visa program gives him an appreciation for the value of imported labor, and that his business background will lead to better trade with other nations, he said.

"I don't think this administration or any administration would go counter to the opportunities driven ... (by) free enterprise," Lujan said. "And I think that the U.S. is looking to reward or create high-value jobs, and ... people want their food."

Agriculture "is very positive for both countries," he said. "We need to work together to bring affordable food to the populations of both countries."

And he hopes that as future generations grow up enjoying berries year-round, per capita consumption — and thus demand — will continue to increase.

"I'm excited," Lujan said. "There's excitement within the company. We have a lot of challenges, but we have a lot of great people. We're starting the year after having a really successful previous year. 2016 was a good year for us, and we're carrying that momentum and really looking at a really positive outlook."

"I'm energized by that, and I think the company's energized by it, too," he said.

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To submit an event go to the Community Events calendar on the home page of our website at www.capitalpress.com and click on "Submit an Event." Calendar items can also be mailed to Capital Press, 1400 Broadway St. NE, Salem, OR 97301.

Monday, Jan. 16

Oregon Blueberry Conference. 8 a.m.-6 p.m. Salem Convention Center, 200 Commercial St. SE, Salem. Presented by the Oregon Blueberry Commission and the North Willamette Research and Extension Center. 503-589-1700 or oregonblueberry.com.

Tuesday, Jan. 17

Succession Planning Workshop orientation. 9 a.m.-noon. This is the first of two workshops on succession planning. Cost includes planning workbook and food. Presenters from: OSU's Ties to the Land, Green Belt Land Trust, Farm Credit Services and attorneys specializing in conservation and farm and ranch estate planning. Western Oregon University Werner University Center, Pacific Room, Monmouth, Ore. Cost: \$50 per family. <http://www.polkswdc.com/success.html>

Tuesday-Thursday Jan. 17-19

38th Annual Eastern Idaho Ag Expo. Idaho State University Holt Arena, 921 South 8th Ave., Pocatello, Idaho. www.spectraproductions.com

Wednesday-Thursday Jan. 18-19

Northwest Hay Expo. Three Rivers Convention Center, 7016 W. Grandridge Blvd., Kennewick, Wash. www.wa-hay.org

49th Annual Idaho Potato Conference. Idaho State University's Pond Student Union Building, 921 S. Eighth Ave., Pocatello, Idaho. Speakers include Idaho Potato Commission President and CEO Frank Muir, Potatoes USA President and CEO Blair Richardson and National Potato Council Executive Vice President John Keeling. <http://bit.ly/2fayqPE>

Idaho Noxious Weed Conference. Riverside Hotel, 2900 Chinden Blvd., Boise, Idaho. www.idahoweedcontrol.org

Wednesday-Friday Jan. 18-20

Idaho Horticulture Expo. Boise Centre on the Grove, 850 W. Front St., Boise, Idaho. Sponsored by the Idaho Nursery and Landscape Association, this annual event offers topics seminars and workshops on topics important to the nursery industry. inlagrow.org

Thursday, Jan. 19

Oregon Tall Fescue Commission meeting. 6-8 p.m. Cascade Grill restaurant, 110 Opal St. NE, Albany, Ore. www.oregontallfescue.org/

Friday, Jan. 20

Ninth Annual Ag Summit. 7:30 a.m.-1:30 p.m. Salem Convention Center, 200 Commercial St. SE, Salem, Ore. Features include a legislative preview and panel discussions about emerging trends and changing laws in water resources, employment law and real estate sales. Presented by the Dunn Carney law firm. Admission is free. www.dunnarney.com

Family Foresters Workshop, 8:30 a.m.-5 p.m. Coeur d'Alene Inn, 506 W. Appleway Ave., Coeur

d'Alene, Idaho. The program will feature presentations on up and coming forest products, changes in Inland Northwest family forestry, managing forests in the face of droughts, effectiveness of prescribed burns in preventing fire; research updates on forest biofuels, managing family forest habitats for moose and the annual family forest economics/policy update. Register by Jan. 13. Cost: \$85-\$90. www.uidaho.edu/FamilyForesterWorkshop

Saturday, Jan. 21

13th Annual Cattlemen's Workshop. 9 a.m.-3 p.m. Blue Mountain Conference Center, 404 12th St., La Grande, Ore. <http://oregonstate.edu/dept/earcunion>

Tuesday-Wednesday Jan. 24-25

Western Idaho Ag Expo. 9 a.m.-4 p.m. Caldwell Events Center, 2207 Blaine St., Caldwell, Idaho. <http://www.spectraproductions.com>

Tuesday-Thursday Jan. 24-26

Northwest Agricultural Show. Portland Expo Center, 2060 N. Marine Drive, Portland, Ore. The hours are 9 a.m.-6 p.m. on Tuesday, 9 a.m.-8 p.m. on Wednesday and 9 a.m.-3 p.m. on Thursday. www.nwagshow.com

Washington-Oregon Potato Conference 2017. Three Rivers Convention Center, 7016 Grandridge Blvd., Kennewick, Wash. www.potatoconference.com

Wednesday-Friday Jan. 25-27

FSPCA Preventive Controls for Human Food Course. Idaho Department of Labor, 600 N. Thornton St., Post Falls, Idaho. The new Food Safety Modernization

Act regulation requires every processing facility to have a trained resource person or "Preventive Controls Qualified Individual" who has completed a specialized training course (such as this one) developed by the Food Safety Preventive Controls Alliance that is recognized by the FDA. This person will oversee the implementation of the facility's food safety plan and other key tasks. <http://bit.ly/2f6cogT>

Wednesday-Saturday Jan. 25-28

American Sheep Industry Association Convention. Denver Marriott City Center, 1701 California St., Denver, Colo. www.sheepusa.org/About_Events_Convention

EcoFarm Conference. Asilomar Conference Grounds, 800 Asilomar Ave., Pacific Grove, Calif. The theme of this year's meeting is "Cultivating Diversity." <https://eco-farm.org/conference>

Wednesday, Feb. 1

California Prune Industry Summit. Orchard Creek Lodge, Lincoln, Calif. www.californiadriedplums.org

Tuesday, Feb. 7

Pesticide Short Course-IPM. 8 a.m.-4:10 p.m. Lane Community College, Center for Meeting and Learning, Bldg. 19, 4000 E. 30th Ave., Eugene, Ore. \$85 if registered by Jan. 23; \$95 after. <http://extension.oregonstae.edu/lane/farms>

Alfalfa U. Learn how alfalfa can contribute to a farm's profitability. Canyon Crest Dining and Event Center, 330 Canyon Crest Drive, Twin Falls, Idaho. alfalfaU.com