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AGRICULTURE

Ugly tomatoes are sitting pretty

The Department of Agriculture will allow UglyRipe tomatoes to be exported out of Florida over the wishes of state growers.

By Christina Hoag

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The tomato beauty contest is over.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture on Wednesday exempted the succulent but misshapen UglyRipe tomato from roundness standards that had prevented its sale outside Florida.

The move ends an ugly, three-year-ripe food fight between Plant City grower Santa Sweets and the Florida Tomato Committee, which regulates the Sunshine State's all-important winter tomato crop.

"It's like winning the Super Bowl," said Joe Procacci, chief executive of Philadelphia-based Procacci Brothers Sales, which owns Santa Sweets and is one of the nation's biggest tomato growers.

Reginald L. Brown, manager of the Florida Tomato Committee, did not return a phone call for comment.

But in a 26-page letter to the USDA, he opposed giving UglyRipe a pass.

Brown argued that like other tomatoes, some UglyRipes meet roundness standards and others don't. And so, he said, exempting the whole UglyRipe crop is unfair to growers of other tomatoes who would still lose specimens that are just not round enough.

GOVERNMENT APPEAL

Gov. Jeb Bush and state Agricultural Commissioner Charles Bronson weighed in along the same lines. In a letter, Bush wrote that an exemption for UglyRipe would give "an unfair competitive advantage" to one grower over others.

The USDA didn't bite. Nor did the majority of consumers who wrote in to the agency.

Tomato fans said the UglyRipe -- which sells at a premium \$3 a pound -- just tastes better. The crop can yield several million dollars a year in sales.

Now the USDA has allowed UglyRipe into its Identity Preservation Program for the conservation of unique, value-added crops. The tomato will now be subject to USDA auditing to check on its genetic fingerprint and oversee its handling.

The UglyRipe, which is of the heirloom beefsteak variety, is the fruit of 20 years of labor and \$3 million of investment by the 79-year-old Procacci, whose quest was to come up with a more flavorful, "backyard tasting" tomato.

In 1999, he started growing the tomato commercially.

For the next three seasons, the Florida Tomato Committee granted the UglyRipe a roundness exemption and allowed the puckered-as-a-prune fruit to be shipped out of state.

But in 2003, the exemption was rescinded. The committee of tomato growers decided the UglyRipe's ugliness could turn consumers off all Florida tomatoes. The UglyRipe was still marketed inside Florida.

MEDIA ATTENTION

Procacci, who attributed the change of heart to jealousy of the UglyRipe's growing sales, spun into action with a public relations campaign that spawned editorials in The New York Times and The Miami Herald condemning the ban.

He said he wasn't prepared for the USDA decision and only has about 100 acres of UglyRipes planted in Central Florida this season. Next year he's looking to bump that up to about 700 acres and will ship them coast to coast, plus even sell them online.

"The demand could be tremendous," he said.