STDF CASE STORY SERIES

LOCAL PROBLEMS, GLOBAL SOLUTIONS

Known for its intense jewel-like shape and dazzling pink colour, the tropical dragon fruit is a treat to eat. Rich in Vitamin C and antioxidants, the dragon fruit is cultivated in tropical countries, including Vietnam. Several years ago growers and exporters of dragon fruit in Vietnam saw potential to export to international markets and began shipping to the United States. Dragonberry Produce was one of these exporters who foresaw the tremendous opportunity that the US market offered for this unique and delicious fruit. In 2011, Dragonberry began exporting an average of eight to ten containers per week of dragon fruit from Vietnam to the US. During this time, Dragonberry estimated its weekly sales of dragon fruit at $75,000 USA dollars.

In 2013, things took a different turn - containers of dragon fruit began getting detained and rejected at US ports due to pesticide violations of a fungicide Difenoconazole. Faced with a pressing market access problem and fast loosing exports, Dragonberry contacted the Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and sought ways to resolve this predicament. Through this, Dragonberry came to know of the Standards and Trade Development Facility's (STDF) global initiative to improve the capacity of select developing countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America to meet pesticide-related export requirements. FAS, along with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the IR-4 Project at Rutgers University have been collaborating with the STDF in this initiative. Currently, the STDF is funding projects in Africa, Asia and Latin America which aim to help small exporters and farmers who are trying to get ahead by capturing a little piece of the global export market for their speciality crop, like the dragon fruit grown in Vietnam. The problem faced by these farmers and exporters is that there are no maximum residue levels (MRLs) for most pesticides on their speciality crops.

Pesticide residue data needed to establish Codex MRLs are almost exclusively generated in developed industrialized countries. Very rarely are data generated in developing countries and, therefore, few Codex MRLs are established for minor-use or speciality crops like the dragon fruit, grown in developing countries. Where MRLs do not exist, exporters often face challenges to reach export markets. If MRLs do not reflect the actual pesticide use patterns where the crops are grown, the pests will not be controlled effectively. The three regional STDF projects aim to address this global logjam and gap by helping developing countries to generate residue data in order to facilitate the registration of new crop protection tools establish needed MRLs, and boost international trade.

Interestingly, at the time of Dragonberry’s contact with the FAS and STDF, Vietnam was not part of the STDF project in Asia. Until that point in time, the Vietnamese government had expressed reservations regarding their preparedness to participate in the STDF project. They were not certain whether they had the capacity to undertake the required field and laboratory work required under the STDF project. To counter this, FAS as a partner in the STDF projects, took the lead initiative on awareness raising and met with the Ministry of Agriculture, various dragon fruit exporters, field and laboratory researchers, explaining the project in more detail and ensuring them that a lot of direct training and assistance would be provided to ensure that Vietnam could successfully participate in the required work. Under the project, Vietnam was offered to begin trials on Difenoconazole to address their immediate trade problem, and also Azoxytrocin, another reduced-risk fungicide known to be applied on the dragon fruit in combination with Difenoclozole. Involving the Vietnamese government was not an over-night task, however, in 2014 another shipment containing dragon fruit to the US was rejected and this triggered Vietnam’s participation.

The Chief Executive Officer of Dragonberry urged the Vietnamese government to get involved in the STDF project so that the trials could be held and international MRLs established. Soon after that, the Ministry of Agriculture in Vietnam expressed their readiness to participate in the STDF project and benefit from the export of dragon fruit. This was followed by an urgent effort to get a Vietnamese study team in place. Yet it soon
became clear that there still would not be sufficient number of trials conducted by Vietnam to get Codex MRLs established, and to facilitate access to US markets.

Realising that time was key, the team in Vietnam was combined with Indonesia which was already in the process of conducting field trials on dragon fruit under the STDF project in Asia. Taking advantage of this partnership, Vietnam began shipping their samples to partner laboratories in Indonesia. In November 2014, only a few months after being part of the project, Vietnam completed their first set of trails - which have been recognized as among one of the best and most organized studies under the STDF project. Following this outcome, Dragonberry Produce and their Vietnamese colleagues are optimistic about reaching a long term solution faced by exports of dragon fruit from Vietnam.

The STDF is leading this initiative which aims to increase participation of developing countries in setting Codex MRLS from Africa, Asia and Latin America. Like Dragonberry Produce, exporters, farmers and businesses frequently encounter market access obstacles resulting from insufficient international trade standards for tropical crops. By developing a process to facilitate the establishment of Codex MRLS for these crops of economic importance to developing countries, the three STDF projects are expected to enhance the ability of producers in developing countries to access important export markets and improve rural economic opportunities.

If you would like more information on the STDF please visit: http://www.standardsfacility.org/. Information on the STDF MRL projects can be found at: Asia (http://www.standardsfacility.org/PG-337), Africa (http://www.standardsfacility.org/PG-359) and Latin America (http://www.standardsfacility.org/PG-359).