

**Testimony of Kevin Safrance, Executive Vice Chairman**

**Mastronardi Produce**

**House Agriculture Committee**

**21st Century Food Systems: Controlled Environment Agriculture's Role in Protecting Domestic Food Supply Chains and Infrastructure**

**July 29, 2021**

Good morning. Thank you, Chairman Scott and Ranking Member Thompson for holding a hearing to discuss this extremely important topic, and for inviting Mastronardi Produce to appear before you and share our perspective and story. My name is Kevin Safrance. You may be familiar with our company's main fresh fruit and vegetable brand, *Sunset* and sub-brands, *Campari*®, *Wild Wonders*®, *Flavor Bombs*®, *One Sweet*®, *WOW™ berries*, and others, found on the largest retailer shelves throughout the US. These and many other fruit and vegetable varieties are grown right here in America in sustainable, state-of-the-art, highly efficient indoor farms, using modern farming technology many now refer to as Controlled Environment Agriculture, or CEA.

Along with my brother-in-law our Chief Executive Officer and President, Paul Mastronardi, the Mastronardi family has the honor of appearing before this Committee today to discuss the benefits of Controlled Environment Agriculture. As became painfully clear over the past year and a half, the United States has a fragile domestic food supply chain and infrastructure that require investment, not just to carry us through challenges but to take care of Americans in good times and bad. Currently, more than half of all fruits are imported to the United States and nearly one third of all vegetables are imported. This, while American farms – especially highly efficient CEA farms – have the ability and desire to increase America's food supply from farming done right here in our country. In fact, during the pandemic and at other times, we grow more food than

we are able to harvest with our current workforce, which means that we are forced to throw food away rather than harvest and sell or donate it. We believe CEA farming is the key to quickly, sustainably, and efficiently strengthening America's food supply chain. We simply need more workers to help us get the job done. With an enhanced workforce, we are confident we can make a rapid and significant contribution to the strength of the nation's food supply.

Mastronardi Produce is a fourth-generation family operated business devoted to providing high-quality fresh fruits and vegetables to people across North America and beyond. As a pioneer and industry leader in greenhouse farming, Mastronardi prides itself on producing consistently flavorful tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, berries, and leafy greens in an environmentally and worker-friendly manner. Our direct workforce represents approximately 4,000 jobs across the United States making Mastronardi the largest CEA farming and distribution operation in North America. This includes farms in Coldwater, Michigan; Oneida, New York; Madison, Maine; Wapakoneta, Ohio; and Brush, Colorado. Mastronardi is also proud to have approximately one million square feet of cooled distribution facilities throughout the country located in Jonestown, Pennsylvania; Livonia, Michigan; Laredo, Texas; Lakeland, Florida; and Castroville, California.

Our geographic footprint allows us to reach American consumers within hours of our farms and distribution facilities. Mastronardi serves the top retailers and major food service companies in the United States. This supply chain provides consumers with a consistent and reliable supply of flavorful, nutritious produce.

In the 1920's, Paul's great grandfather, Armando Mastronardi established Mastronardi's farming roots when he moved to North America and purchased a field farm. It was Paul's

grandfather – Umberto – who traveled to the Netherlands and witnessed first-hand the benefits of growing produce in a protected greenhouse environment. This led to Umberto constructing the first commercial greenhouse in North America. Umberto's son – Don – unexpectedly took over the Mastronardi business at age 25 and expanded its distribution operations into Detroit, Michigan in the early 1970's. Paul, grew up in the business learning how to make boxes and harvest fruit from an early age. Paul soon realized that consumers sought after more readily available flavorful tomatoes, which greenhouse farming methods provide. Mastronardi's innovative realization led to the first greenhouse grown grape tomato. We pride ourselves on innovation in all aspects of the business, including industry leading advancements in top-seal packaging that reduced plastic use more than 20%, and increase use of sustainable compostable packaging.

You've called this hearing today to examine the contribution CEA farming can make to Protecting Domestic Food Supply Chains and Infrastructure. We would like to offer several key thoughts on this.

First, because of the unique way in which a wide range of fruits and vegetables can be grown indoors, CEA farming enables significant amounts of fresh fruits and vegetables to be grown closer to the stores and retailers that serve American consumers. This is vitally important considering the transportation and shipping issues experienced by many during the pandemic, as well as the damaging effects of climate change and inclement weather. Security of the domestic food supply can only be accomplished with a significant expansion of CEA farms in the United States. Much of the rest of the world is far ahead of the U.S. in achieving domestic food security through CEA acreage. There are approximately 520,000 acres of CEA in Europe and

50,000 in Mexico, but only 6,000 in the U.S. most of which does not contain updated advanced technology. As we see a drastic imbalance of CEA produce acreage, we also find the U.S. relying more and more on imports to meet the present and increasing consumer demand for fresh fruits and vegetables. Nearly two thirds of fresh fruits and one-third of vegetables are imported into and consumed annually in the U.S.<sup>1,2</sup> For certain categories of vegetables, like tomatoes, more than 60% are imported. To balance this trend, the U.S. must embrace CEA, which is widely used in Europe, Canada, and Mexico, to meet growing consumer demand.

Second, CEA farming permits the grower to control and monitor virtually all of the elements of the environment, from the nutrients the plants receive to advanced computer systems with hundreds of thousands of data points to control and adjust, humidity, temperature, light, climate and other environment factors. Storm and irrigation water are collected, used, and then recycled resulting in a fraction of use compared to traditional farming. This means food production can continue even when nature might like to stop it.

Further, we use an integrated pest management system to minimize the use of pesticides. For example, we use ladybugs and other insects to control harmful pests, and we bring in bees to the greenhouse for pollination.

We also pioneered a traceback food safety system enabling us to identify the date, specific crop location, and team member who physically harvested the produce.

Environmental sustainability is at the forefront of many conversations these days, and it is always on the forefront of our minds as CEA farmers. Government agencies, companies, and

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<sup>1</sup> <https://migration.ucdavis.edu/rmn/blog/post/?id=2498> (tomatoes 61%)

<sup>2</sup> <https://migration.ucdavis.edu/rmn/blog/post/?id=2569>

non-governmental organizations need to embrace more efficient, environmentally sustainable systems predicated on technology. CEA is paving the way for the U.S. to maintain domestic food security in a climate conscience manner. CEA greenhouses use ten times less water and require ten times less land than conventional farms, and significantly reduces the carbon footprint as a result of shorter distances from greenhouses to customer. That means CEA farms don't just help us to secure the nation's food supply; they also help us to sustain the nation's water supply and land supply and care for our planet. At a time when many in our country are sadly facing water shortages on top of the nation's supply chain problems related to food, these additional benefits of sustainable CEA farming cannot be underscored enough.

As I mentioned earlier, however, the primary barrier to meeting the need here in America is that we, like many other farmers, lack a stable workforce to help us with the harvest.

Today's modern CEA farms are incredibly efficient. One greenhouse worker can harvest the equivalent to **37 traditional** field farm workers. Despite our farms being climate controlled and the day-to-day work being done without being subject to the harsh elements, CEA farms struggle to attract and maintain a stable workforce. We eagerly seek out and hire qualified domestic workers. Whenever we are unable to find those qualified workers, we are forced to turn to contractors or the H-2A program. The program, however, has grown cumbersome and unreliable for this modern and sustainable type of farming that frankly wasn't contemplated when the H-2A program was first developed. For example, CEA farming requires facility cleanout, sanitation, and crop preparation processes that did not exist in 1986 when the H-2A program was created. A 50 ft tomato plant—which you can find any day on our farms during harvest —was not contemplated by the authors 35 years ago. These innovations beckon us to modernize and

update the system, not just so we can partner with more H-2A workers, but so we can fix the domestic food supply chain and feed Americans with food grown right here in America.

The U.S. has an opportunity to meet growing consumer demand with expanded U.S. production of fresh produce, but only if the labor situation is addressed. Mastronardi is proud to add its name to a long list of businesses and organizations asking Congress to act on the issue of agricultural labor. We urge Committee members to continue to work with their counterparts in the Senate to pass the Farm Workforce Modernization Act, but to address the unique needs of our segment of the industry as part of that reform legislation. By updating the rules that allow us to responsibly use the H2-A program, we will be able to unleash a new era in American agriculture. One that grows far more of our produce domestically, on environmentally controlled farms that provide lower cost, higher quality produce that American consumers demand to live healthier lives.

In closing, I want to thank this Committee for the chance to discuss our business and the remarkable opportunities Controlled Environment Agriculture present to the United States. CEA farms and the fruits and vegetables they produce will allow us to meet the challenge of feeding a growing population with healthier foods. Mr. Chairman, this concludes my opening testimony.

I look forward to answering any questions you might have.