

THE PRODUCE NEWS

NATIONAL NEWSWEEKLY OF THE FRESH PRODUCE INDUSTRY SINCE 1897

Vol. 109, No. 7

Week of February 20, 2006

Zuhlke & Assoc. staying abreast of the new world of packaging

by Christina DiMartino

Kurt Zuhlke Sr. founded Kurt Zuhlke & Associates Inc. in 1955. The Bangor, PA, firm since evolved to become a major produce packaging supplier. Among the many packaging products it develops and produces for numerous food categories, it has a strong grasp on the needs of the greenhouse industry.

Kurt Zuhlke Jr., now the president and chief executive officer of the company, sees the greenhouse industry and how it is evolving in North America from a broad vantage point.

"We see growth throughout the U.S. as well as Canada and Mexico," said Mr. Zuhlke. "People who began with a small area, maybe half an acre of greenhouses, are adding to their structures over time. Greenhouse products aren't subjected to weather conditions like field produce, and even with the fuel crisis, the ability to control the temperature is at least an option."

Mr. Zuhlke said that the growers' movement has a lot to do with growers looking more seriously at



Kurt Zuhlke Jr., president and chief executive officer of Kurt Zuhlke & Associates.

the greenhouse option. It is easier to control problems in an enclosed environment, and that consequently reduces the need for chemical applications. But the organics trend is also affecting packaging. Although there is increased interest in the all-natural corn-based products, they come with their own set of problems.

"It is a natural product made from a living plant and so has a shelf life just like all plants," he explained. "The products must be

able to last at least six months in a warehouse that may be subjected to temperature changes. And you have to be able to process the products inside of the containers within set guidelines. For example, our microwave corn trays have to be able to withstand the high temperatures they will be subjected to during cooking. Cost is another issue."

Despite the challenges to be overcome, Mr. Zuhlke said that the focus on the environment and the growing demand for products that do not deplete natural resources keep research teams working aggressively to find improved packaging options. Advances and innovations with polylactic acid, better known as PLA, offer especially strong hope, and research and development being done now in Asia and other parts of the world may result in products that can tolerate the demands placed on them in the produce category.

"Stability of the product remains a concern if products have to be shipped in a closed container from foreign countries," Mr. Zuhlke added. "Shipment time can be as much as 14 days, at the end of which products are transferred to a facility for distribution, which takes more time. The interiors of

the containers can reach as much as 100 degrees, and that could result in another entirely different set of problems. One company in England is using a starch to prevent heat effects, but it results in an opaque container. The produce industry wants clear containers because consumers demand to see the product they are buying."

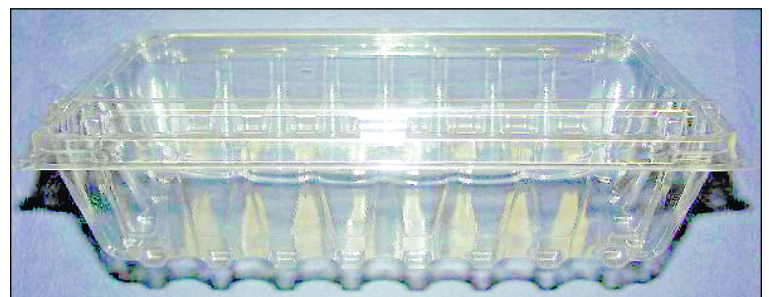
Kurt Zuhlke & Associates is an ecologically friendly firm that is strongly focused on the need for recyclable products. Its line includes PLA clamshells for organic tomatoes and other products in numerous sizes and shapes.

The company continues to experience great success with its two- and three-cell microwavable corn trays. Mr. Zuhlke said that consumers put the entire package into their microwaves for four to five minutes, and the corn is ready to serve, making it perfect for today's busy consumer.

"We have also introduced a new low-profile quart container for tomatoes, berries and other fresh commodities," said Mr. Zuhlke. "These are designed so that fragile items are not packed too densely, thereby causing damage to the product at the bottom of the package. They are at market now and performing very well."



Kurt Zuhlke & Associates manufactures microwavable trays for corn in two- and three-ear configurations. Consumers need only place the entire tray in the microwave for four or five minutes to enjoy fresh, hot corn on-the-cob.



Kurt Zuhlke & Associates has developed a low-profile quart-size clamshell for fragile produce items. The shape ensures that delicate items are not packed too densely and damaged.