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Growers Express buys Green Giant Fresh rights from Sholl Group II

by Tim Linden

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LAS VEGAS -- In what is basically a swapping of positions, Salinas, CA-based Growers Express LLC has become the holder of the master license agreement for the "Green Giant Fresh" brand, while the previous holder of that agreement, The Sholl Group II, has become a sub-license holder for use of the brand in the value-added sector.

Woody Johnson, senior vice president of Growers Express and general manager of the new venture, told The Produce News that his firm had become the volume leader so it made sense that it manage the branding agreement with the 13 other sub-licensees.

The "Green Giant" brand was created by Pillsbury and later purchased by General Mills, which markets many of the canned and frozen products that made that brand famous. The "Green Giant Fresh" brand was acquired in 1995 by The Sholl Group II, which has served as the holder of the master license ever since. For the past decade, the use of the "Green Giant Fresh" brand has increased as The Sholl Group II expanded the brand's use to many fresh commodities with many grower-shippers. Among that group was Growers Express, which had held the license for 12 years and had packed numerous fresh vegetables in the brand, including lettuce, broccoli and cauliflower.

Other licensees include Colorful Harvest in Salinas, CA, and Potandon Produce in Idaho Falls, ID, both of which are under The Sholl Group umbrella. Potandon Produce, however, also has a master license agreement with General Mills and will not fall under the license agreement with Growers Express. Colorful Harvest, which grows and markets berries, avocados and melons under the "Green Giant Fresh" label, will be a sub-licensee to Growers Express.

Mr. Johnson said that for all the companies that have existing branding rights for "Green Giant Fresh," there will be a seamless transition. "We have stepped into Sholl's shoes, and there will be no changes for either the shippers or the buyers of this brand," he said.

However, the Growers Express executive said that the firm will work with other licensees to improve the marketing of the brand. "We expect to get more involved with cross promotions with the other items," he said. "There may also be some synergies in the areas of transportation and logistics."

Doug Ranno, chief operating officer of Colorful Harvest, said that he looks forward to the new relationship with Growers Express. "Sholl used to facilitate the communications and royalty rights between the licensees and General Mills," he said. "Growers Express will now handle that role. I see it as a plus. We used to have brand oversight in Minnesota, and now our brand oversight partner is right down the street in Salinas. That will be a benefit."

Independently, Messrs. Johnson and Ranno both said that the relationship could also create new opportunities in crop and acreage expansion. "We may have access to some better land in the Salinas Valley," Mr. Ranno said.

Mr. Johnson almost echoed those comments, stating that Growers Express is owned by growers and that there may be some opportunities for these growers to get involved in a growing level with some of the other "Green Giant Fresh" commodities. In fact, he said, Growers Express will soon expand the "Green Giant Fresh" label into both artichokes and brussels sprouts. He said that brussels sprouts could become a signature crop for the brand as there will be an effort to use the "little spout" moniker that Green Giant made famous.

Jeff Sholl, founder, president and principal owner of The Sholl Group, explained the rationale for the sale of the licensing agreement in a press release from Growers Express and The Sholl Group: "The Sholl Group team has increasingly turned its attention and efforts to developing a value-added 'Green Giant Fresh' business. We recognized that Growers Express, a long-term important part of the 'Green Giant Fresh' commodity business, would bring increased focus to the licensing business. Growers Express has proven strategic strength, leadership and expertise in the fresh produce business. They know and understand the entire fresh produce business cycle, from farm to retailers. We expect a smooth transition and look forward to working with them in this new capacity."

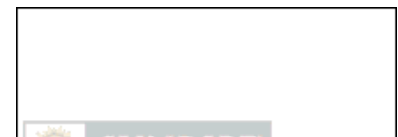
Jamie Strachan, chief executive officer and president of Growers Express, added in the release, "We are excited about this opportunity to work closer with all of our 'Green Giant Fresh' partners as well as our respective customers to further develop this brand, which has one of the longest and most respected legacies in the retail sector. We have been very proud to be a licensing partner of 'Green Giant Fresh' branded products, and we look forward to further leveraging our fresh produce expertise. Our organization is well positioned to grow the 'Green Giant Fresh' line of products and leverage the tremendous brand equity of the 'Green Giant' brand throughout the fresh produce category."



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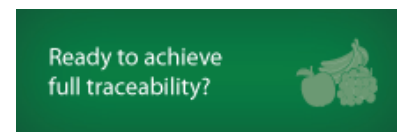
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