

## MARKETRACK

# Los Angeles

*The large Hispanic population in the Los Angeles area — as well as in other parts of California — influences the produce that retailers must stock to meet consumer demands.*

## New MCL/4-Earth corporate complex nears completion

BY RAND GREEN

LOS ANGELES — “After two years of planning, eight months of intensive construction and taking advantage of a number of environmentally friendly ‘green technologies,’ MCL Distributing, Inc./4-Earth is proud to announce that its new state-of-the-art specialty and organic produce sales, distribution and processing complex is nearing completion,” the company said in a written statement July 2.

The new facility is located in the City of Commerce, just a few minutes drive from the Los Angeles Wholesale Produce market. When complete, “with its food safety program and state-of-the-art design, it will be like no other produce facility on the West Coast,” the statement said.

The facility, built on an eight-acre site, has more than 140,000 square feet of refrigerated storage and 25 truck-high environmentally sealed loading bays. Different zones within the facility can be maintained at different temperatures as required by particular products.

The facility has a dedicated and isolated storage area for organic products as well as a 50,000-square-foot HACCP- and QAI-based value-added packing department, according to the statement.

“We are very excited” about the new facility, said David Lake, the company’s co-founder and chief executive officer. “Not only is this building going to make the business we currently do more efficient, but because of our new capabilities and storage capacity, it will allow us to provide a lot more logistical support to our customers.”

“It’s all about getting trucks in and out fast,” said Robert Lake, the company’s chief operating officer. “We will continue to be open 24 hours, seven days a week for shipping and receiving merchandise... but having the 25 loading bays and an abundance of off-street parking will allow our customers to get in and out of Los Angeles outside peak traffic periods.”

Reducing traffic congestion and



An architectural rendering of the new MCL facility.

improving food-safety assurance were two of the major purposes for building the new facility, according to David Lake. “In designing this new facility, we spared no expense in creating what we feel will become a benchmark for other produce suppliers to aspire to. We don’t view food safety as a necessary evil; we consider it a moral imperative. From our product never leaving the cold chain to a sterilized value-added packing facility, we feel we’ve done everything we can to ensure our products are safe for the customer.”

Food safety has been an “institutional foundation” of MCL since its founding in 1993, and the company’s current building, completed four years ago, “was years ahead of its time, exceeding all government-directed food safety requirements,” according to the written statement.

Along with the construction of a new, larger facility, MCL continues to expand its specialty products line and its organic line and to become increasingly involved in the farming side of the business, according to David Lake.

Five-and-a-half-years ago, MCL “made a commitment that in order to expand with its customer base and get greater control and identify some of the items that would enhance our product line, we started partnering with farmers,” he said in an interview with The Produce News. As a result, the company is now farming in Santa Maria, CA, and in Baja California, Mexico, “as well as a little

bit” in mainland Mexico.

That involvement on the farming side has also improved food safety by giving the company better control over the product from the ground up and the ability to assure that testing is done at every step along the way. “I mean, we’ve got our hands on it all the way to the dirt,” he said.

The company has recently added several new items to its mix, primarily vegetables such as squash, beans, broccoli, snow peas, snap peas, chilis and such specialty items as French Beans and baby squash, Mr. Lake said.

“MCL has always had a commitment to specialties,” he said. But a focus has been on identifying specialty items “that sell” and bring customers a return. “We are really involved in promoting the specialty items that actually have some value... because that is what creates sales for our customers.”

Organics are “a big piece of the future” and offer major opportunities for retailers and wholesalers, he said. But “it is important to handle organics properly through your facilities,” and that is why the MCL facilities are QAI certified.

MCL is not directly involved in farming organics at present, “but we do have several growers that are growing specifically for us,” and the company is also working with other organic growers, he said. “We have a significant tree fruit program in organics and a significant vegetable program.”