

GEFF Tajikistan Radio Interview #5: Fruits (apricot) processing

Moderator:

Hello dear listeners, I am Subhon Jalilov, and you are listening to "Agriculture Talks". In the past few interviews, we had discussions with agriculture and agri-value-chains experts, raising issues related to the green technologies and adoption of modern solutions at the farm level. Solutions which will help to deal with challenges and may enhance competitiveness of Tajik agri sector. Today we are will discuss fruit processing, in particular apricot processing.

I would like to remind you that the program has a Question and Answer session. Direct your questions to the experts via phone at 2231106, or simply use Direct Messaging on our Facebook page - @radiovatan. Our invited experts will be glad to answer your questions.

Let me introduce our guests today. Mr. Aubjon Aminjonov, who manages the technology process of fruit processing at the company LLC "Mevai Qand" and Mr. Mirzoravshan Qobilov, the Director of the Quality Management Center. Also, we have Mr. Usmonkul Boturov, GEFF Tajikistan Deputy Team Leader, accompanying us in this series. I would like to welcome all of you and I think we're going to have a very interesting conversation on fruit processing today. Firstly, I would like to ask Mr. Boturov to briefly introduce the programme objectives and activities of the GEFF Tajikistan, please.

GEFF Tajikistan expert:

Thanks a lot, it is nice to be back with you here. The Green Economy Financing Facility in Tajikistan is a product of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, working in cooperation with the European Union, the Green Climate Fund and the Republic of Korea.

The Facility operates through Participating Financial Institutions in Tajikistan, supporting transition to a green economy, with \$25 million of financing for energy and resource efficiency investments. GEFF Tajikistan supports various, innovative green technologies, with special focus on the agricultural sector. In partnership with the European Union, GEFF Tajikistan offers investment incentives for farmers and agri-business, who invest in a modern and efficient equipment and technologies. If you have comments and questions regarding our today's technology, or about the GEFF Tajikistan project please call 93 4339001 or visit our Facebook page.

Today we discuss the important topic of fruit processing and its further export. Tajikistan is the best place in Central Asia for the cultivation of pome and stone fruits. Here we have a good mix of water resources, dry summers and cool winters. In January - June 2020, 123,515 tons of fruits were produced in all categories of farms in the Republic, including 10,306 tons of apples and 85,876 tons of apricots. Production increased by 1.8% compared to the same period in 2019. There are a lot of orchards in Tajikistan and 44% of orchards are located in the Sughd region. Since the Sughd region mainly produces apricots, 97% of fruit processing is concentrated there, including canning fresh apricots, drying, making juices etc.

To achieve sustainable growth in export earnings, Tajik farmers must increase productivity, diversify crops, improve post-harvest processing and quality control. Tajik processors should introduce new products and packaging that would reflect the needs of the external market.

Moderator:

Yes, right. Thanks. Mr. Boturov, and let's continue with our invited experts on fruit processing Mr. Aubjon Aminjonov. I know that "Mevai Qand" LLC was established in 2014 in Konibodom and the company is one of the largest fruit processors and exporters in Tajikistan. It also has the HACCP and ISO 22000 certificates. Could you give us more information about your company, what kind of agricultural products does "Mevai Qand" process?

Invited Expert:

Yes, sure. Hi everyone. The total area of the enterprise is 1 hectare, where 30 seasonal employees, mainly women, work for 9 months.

Our company has many years of experience in processing and exporting dried fruits. Our products are sold under the Qand Fruit brand. Our workshop is engaged in the secondary processing of dried apricots, black plums, apples, pears and other crops such as mung bean, rice and walnuts. "Mevai Qand" annually processes more than 200 tons of agricultural products, 70 of which are dried apricots.

Moderator:

Thanks, Mr. Aubjon Aminjonov. Would you please tell us a little bit about the process of processing and packaging of apricots?

Invited Expert:

During 2015-2018, our company purchased a new equipment for processing of fruit and vegetable products from Turkey. Over the past three years, \$130,000 has been invested into fixed assets. Secondly, the processing of apricots at the enterprise consists of the following processes: Fumigation or disinfection of dried fruits in the warehouse - soaking fruit - washing fruit - calibration - smoking in the fumigation chamber - thinning in the fruit dryer - drying - sorting - packaging.

The process goes as follows: dried apricots are soaked for 10-15 minutes, then sent to the washing and calibration line. After sorting, it is packed in boxes and smoked in a disinfection chamber with sulfur powder. The drying process takes place in a greenhouse-type fruit dryer for 8-10 hours, which can process up to 5 tons of fruit. The moisture content of dried fruits should be 18-22%. After drying on a special table, the process of sorting and packing of fruit is carried out manually. We put the processed apricots in 5-10 cardboard boxes, 10-15 kilograms to each. The processing capacity of dried apricots is roughly 5 tons per days.

Moderator:

Mr. Aubjon Aminjonov, explain please how the cooperation with the farmers is works. From which districts does your company buy semi-ready products? Could you please tell the farmers and entrepreneurs about what kind of agricultural products you could buy from them and which countries do you export dried fruits to?

Invited Expert:

We buy semi-finished dried apricots in the markets of Asht, Bobojon Gafurov, Isfara and Konibodom districts. We also get dried apples, pears and plums from other districts. We buy all types of dried apricots, apples, pears, plums and walnuts. Our products are mainly exported to Russia and Ukraine, as a result of which, a reliable partnership has been established. We have been cooperating with retail outlets in Kiev, Moscow and Minsk for more than 4 years.

Moderator:

Thank you Mr. Aubjon Aminjonov. Now I would like to talk about quality management, please tell us why is it so important? Would you please inform our audience about international quality standards?

Invited Expert:

Thank you for inviting me today. Today, the issue of the quality of exported food products has become more acute. Due to the difficult current situation of the pandemic, manufacturers faced additional difficulties in analysing finished products and raw materials.

With the opening of the international markets, we have the opportunities to supply Tajik products to the EU countries, the USA and the countries of the East, but unfortunately, the quality of products manufactured in the Republic of Tajikistan leaves much to be desired. Moreover, potential partners, seeing the poor quality of the products prefer not to conclude contracts with Tajik enterprises.

Today, there are many standards. In most cases, they have similar requirements. What standard to be certified depends on the sales market. For example, if you are going to export to England, you need the BRC standard, if to Germany, then FSSC

22000. It is recommended to always focus on standards approved by the GFSI - Global Food Safety Initiative.

Moderator:

Thanks, what would you recommend to farmers and managers of processing enterprises willing to export agricultural products?

Invited Expert:

Before the introduction of any standards, it is necessary to create all the internal conditions, conditions for employees and for the production of the quality products. For this purpose, there are special Prerequisite Term Programs.

In a pandemic, the activities of the HACCP Group turned out to be very relevant. All GHP requirements are strictly followed. Maintaining hygiene and maintaining cleanliness of both the enterprise and the personnel is encouraged by the buyers. They show their loyalty. Compliance with GMP requirements also does not allow for cross-contamination. Separating working areas prevents hazards from entering the product. Unfortunately, not all businesses maintain the correct flow of people, raw materials and finished products. This requires the correct design, documentation, and maintenance of the Prerequisite Programs. Product safety is also influenced by hazard analysis and management. For this, HACCP plans are developed, control-critical points are determined. In the fruit and vegetable processing sector, upon acceptance, farmers need to guarantee the level of pesticides in agricultural products. We still experience difficulties with determining the level of pesticides at the sites. When sulfurizing, enterprises usually work with GOST standards. The international standard of the Codex Alimentarius Commission in relation to the rate of sulfur in dried apricot is 2000 ppm, while GOST imposes a limit of maximum 1000 ppm. The companies strive to meet customer requirements in terms of colour, flavour and size of dried apricots. It is gratifying that many enterprises work according to the DDP 15 standard. This is the UNECE standard for products. Mevai Qand, working in accordance with ISO 22000 standard, has also appointed internal auditors who are working on identifying nonconformities and correcting actions. They are constantly working to improve themselves.

Moderator:

So much useful and valuable information. Thank you! So, it is time to answer the questions that we already received from listeners.

Q&A session

Moderator:

Here we reached the end of the program. Thanks a lot for coming today. Thank you for sharing expertise with our listeners. We hope our listeners enjoyed listening as much as we enjoyed creating it.

And I would like to express my gratitude to the GEFF Tajikistan team for sharing experiences and supporting modern, resource efficiency technologies in Tajikistan. The upcoming session will be announced soon in our news. Thank you and stay safe.