

Glastonbury begins contracting farmers to create successful market linkages and a more stable and sustainable business.



Marcia Charlebois, Marketing Manager

The Gentles family, have been farming in Jamaica for generations. They had traditionally grown bananas, coffee and potatoes. The Gentles family farm in Trelawny continues to produce potatoes and other produce on approximately 200 acres. In September of 1993 they formed the Glastonbury Purveyor Company, a full service supplier of fresh and frozen food products. Since then Glastonbury, under the management of Hugh Gentles and Marcia Charlebois, the company has grown to be a significant food distributor in Jamaica, supplying restaurants, supermarkets and hotels all over the island. They have a dedicated warehouse facility and some cold storage to maintain produce quality and shelf life. As farmers and importers/re-sellers of potatoes and seeds, Glastonbury has participated in various PROPEL consultations and meetings dating back to 2012 and were exposed to the project mantra of self sufficiency and the sustainability of the potato sector.

PROPEL's Senior Agricultural Coordinator, Mr. Alvin Murray, has championed the idea that Jamaica could produce it's own seeds from super elite potatoes. These potatoes he argued, would provide seed potatoes for out of season planting, reduce waste, help with disease control experienced with lower quality potatoes and provide a stable and more continuous revenue stream for the farmers.

Due to the foreign exchange situation, the Government of Jamaica (GOJ) announced a strategy to replace 80-85% of imported table potatoes with local production. This led to the development and launch of the National Irish Potato Programme (NIPP) in October 2013 involving hundred of farmers across 9 parishes. The GOJ committed 25 million dollars to the program to be carried out by the Ministry of Agriculture and the Rural Agricultural Development Agency (RADA). As part of this program, farmers were required to participate in training in which PROPEL had provided technical assistance in the form of Farmer Field Schools, demonstration plots and train the trainer programs for the RADA extension officers.

Review of the Potato Seed Program

PROPEL hosted a review of the Potato Seed Program in May 2014, attended by representatives of the Ministry of Agriculture, RADA, WUSC and various private sector participants including marketing manager, Marcia Charlebois from Glastonbury. A number of issues were highlighted, including: the lack of credit for farmers; the need for additional storage - both for seeds and potatoes; farmers want their potatoes to be purchased at the point of harvest; farmers and re-sellers are competing in the marketplace. Mr. Dermon Spence, Chief Technical Director at the Ministry of Agriculture, pointed out the need for the private sector to provide contracts for farmers. It was also highlighted that there is a need for a local seed production program because the cost of seeds on the world market continues to rise and can become prohibitive.

Encouraged by PROPEL's vision of trying to get potatoes to grow year round in Jamaica and with Mr. Murray's guidance, Glastonbury decided to import the super elite potatoes instead of the traditional grade A seeds and set up a sell and buy back seed program. Ms. Charlebois explained,

"We try to participate in any program that will help Jamaican agriculture become more sustainable. Local potatoes are traditionally only available 6 months of the year, we have storage, so we can supply the market longer. If seeds are available and farmers can produce another crop, we could reduce that gap to 3 months, or less with cold storage."



The Sell and Buy Back Seed Program

Under PROPEL's guidance, Glastonbury went one step further and created, for the first time, the means by which qualified farmers could contract with Glastonbury to be able to get credit to access high quality seeds and other potato inputs. As part of the sell and buy back seed program, they also provided participating farmers with a guaranteed market for their produce at the time of harvest. According to Ms. Charlebois, contracts were offered to their farmers in two forms, both of which guaranteed farmers a market for their produce at a fixed minimum price. In both cases Glastonbury collected, cleaned, graded, stored and sold the potatoes for the farmers. As part of the program, PROPEL with the support of extension officers from RADA, who had been trained by the project, provided the technical assistance to these farmers.

Option 1: A farmer with the Glastonbury contract in hand, could approach the Credit Unions or other financial institutions for a loan to purchase the seeds and other inputs necessary to produce the potato crop. About 60% of the approximately 100 farmers involved in the new seed program were able to do this successfully.

Option 2: Glastonbury provided the seeds, fertilizers, pesticides and other inputs to the farmers upfront, and in return, at harvest the farmer turned over the entire crop to Glastonbury who deducted the cost of inputs supplied and paid the farmer the net value for the crop. The second option is a higher risk to the company especially as the crop is subject to drought, floods and hurricanes. Ms. Charlebois explained that since so many of the potato farmers in Jamaica are small farmers (cultivating between 1-5 acres) it is seen to be a necessary risk and a matter of trust. This offer was extended to farmers well known to the company with whom they had confidence. She pointed out that it is a matter of trust, and so far they have not had any problems with the program even though this year Jamaica had experienced a severe drought and it had affected harvests. Ms. Charlebois stated,

"one of the good things that has come out of this connection with PROPEL is that our farmer base has increased a lot – a good 30-40% of new farmers have become involved with us through the program. The seed program has been very successful and now we are looking at similar programs with other crops, such as onions. It was a good business decision".

Farmer Purchell Johnson, who has been involved in the sell and buy back seed program, had this to say, *"I got the elite seeds from Glastonbury and they gave me a contract to buy back all my potatoes at a reasonable price. They pick them up and sort them, so it makes it easy to do business with them"*



Hugh Gentles (top left) and the Glastonbury team



Glastonbury facilities in Trelawny, Jamaica

Despite a severe drought in 2015, the Sell and Buy Back Potato Seed Program initiated by PROPEL has been lauded as a success and is contributing to the sustainability of the potato sector. PROPEL has other private sector buyers actively looking at contracting with farmers and becoming involved with this program as well as applying it to various other crops. Glastonbury will continue with the program and are looking at the cost/benefit of added cold storage.