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TDCJ Canning Plant

By Terrell McCombs,
TBCJ Vice-Chairman

Since the early 1800's, canned food has been a staple in our society. Often used to preserve fish, meat, vegetables or fruit, canning is an economical way to process and store food for extended time periods without the loss of nutrients or flavor.

TDCJ has been canning vegetables since the early 1950's and constructed its present-day canning plant in the early 1980's. The plant, located at the Terrell Unit in Rosharon, helps supplement the food requirements of the offender population and is operated by TDCJ's Manufacturing, Agribusiness and Logistics Division in cooperation with the unit's management team. It encompasses 122,000 square feet and is operated by thirty-four staff members and more than four hundred offenders. The plant operates 12 months a year, utilizing two six-hour shifts a day, followed by a sanitation shift. The sanitation shift cleans the equipment to meet U.S. Food and Drug Administration standards before the next day's production begins.

The canning plant works in conjunction with Agribusiness' edible crops program to ensure maximum use of suitable TDCJ cropland and the produce it delivers. The edible crops

program produces both spring and fall vegetables that are shipped fresh to the units for immediate consumption or to the canning plant for processing. These vegetables are grown on fifteen unit farms, primarily in south and east Texas, which cover nearly 4,200 acres of agency land. The majority of these acres are dedicated solely to produc-



Terrell Unit Canning Plant Assistant Manager Roland Villarreal inspects sweet potatoes as they are processed for canning.

tion for the canning plant, growing green beans, carrots, sweet potatoes, leafy greens, squash, and cabbage for sauerkraut. In addition to agency-grown produce, TDCJ may also purchase additional sweet potatoes, carrots and dry pinto beans from outside vendors for canning. The agency also contracts for another 320 acres of green beans during the summer months. This practice of having

secondary sources of vegetables enables continued production when agency produce is not available during non-harvest time or due to weather-related issues.

The canning plant's production process begins with product delivery. Upon arrival in crates, the produce is placed in refrigerated vaults to prevent spoilage; the produce is then loaded on conveyers to be washed, peeled, cut, sliced, chopped, shredded and inspected for defects. The approved product is moved to a filling machine where it is placed in cans. Filled cans proceed through a steam table to raise the product's temperature, and onto a closing machine where lids mechanically and hermetically seal the canned produce.

The sealed cans are conveyed to the retort or thermal processing area. The cans are placed in large baskets, which are hoisted and placed in retort pots. There are 40 pots available for thermal processing, each able to hold three baskets of 50 cans each. The retort pots are sealed, and steam is applied to bring the pots to the required temperature for the necessary processing time. The standard temperature for processing produce is 245

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degrees, with cooking times ranging from 22 to 115 minutes. Upon completion of the cooking process, the baskets are removed and immersed in a cooling canal that contains chlorinated water to kill any residual bacteria that might have entered microscopic openings of the heated can.

Following the retort process, the cooled, finished canned products are placed in corrugated boxes that are sealed, labeled, stacked on pallets, and stored at the canning plant warehouse for a minimum of 30 days to identify potential canning defects.

The canning plant produces nearly two million one-gallon cans of finished product per year. Once ready for shipment, they are loaded onto TDCJ transportation services' trailers and delivered to the agency's warehouses for distribution to the units.

By utilizing a variety of functional areas within the agency in the planning, procuring, planting, harvesting, transporting, storing, preparation and serving of these food products for consumption by the offender population, the canning plant and edible crops program provide the agency another cost-effective way to help meet offender food requirements. ●