



Pieter Jan Robbemont over Central Asian cooling facilities

"What's lacking, above all, is basic know-how"

Temperature plays a vital part in fruit and vegetable storage. Here, the essential aspects are those that ensure quality and prevent wastage, and, therefore, decrease costs. So, cooling certainly isn't an unimportant step in the process. In many countries, there are plenty of cooling facilities available. It's easy to store fruit and vegetables at the correct temperature. But that's not a matter of course everywhere. What's the situation in developing countries?



Basic knowledge

"What's lacking, above all, is basic knowledge," says Pieter Jan Robbemont. He's the export manager at Geerlofs Refrigeration. This Dutch company installs refrigeration systems all over the world, including Africa and Central Asia. Pieter Jan has a great deal of experience with fruit refrigeration projects. These include those in places like Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Businesses often use Chinese and Turkish cooling systems. That's due to the lack of knowledge.



Pieter Jan Robbemont (m) in a meeting

In practice, these fridges often turn out to be less suitable for the products being stored. "Basic knowledge is lacking. That's why companies often buy inferior systems." This is also why specific technical refrigeration solutions are diverted to European companies. "There's a demand for cutting-edge technology." As an example, he mentions the long-term storage of apples in ULO cells. "This includes a vast amount of technology and knowledge that's simply not available locally. Then companies are prepared to invest extra."

As a result, Geerlofs, there, installs mostly the same refrigeration systems as in Europe. They usually tailor these to local needs. The larger exporters from, say, Uzbekistan or Kyrgyzstan have to meet specific standards. That's so they can supply Russia and its neighboring countries. "By investing in a good system, these companies can guarantee quality. They can also show clients that they have state-of-the-art cold stores and refrigerated trucks. That allows these exporters to deliver the agreed-upon quality," says Robbemont.



Geerlofs Refrigeration installs refrigeration systems all over the world

Seminars

Clients often involve consultants when developing their cooling systems. These consultants will draw up plans and indicate exactly what kind of cooling is needed. But, clients in Central Asia often don't want to spend money on this. Pieter Jan, however, believes investing in improved knowledge is precisely what leads to savings. This doesn't make things easier for either the installer or the client.

That's why Geerlofs organizes local seminars. They want to raise the know-how level of the entire cooling process. And that starts with the harvest, says Pieter Jan. "The product has to be good when it goes into cold storage. A fridge won't improve a product's quality". But people must know about other aspects too. These include the cooling process and keeping the cooling temperature constant. The cooling cells' oxygen content is also an important factor.



Cold stores from a Geerlofs project

Financing

Financing is less of a headache. That is, for the Central Asian exporting companies that have foreign currency at their disposal. "The top business can get their hands on money or find financing channels. So, they have investment means." This could lead to a pitfall, though, says the export manager. Project investors often want to invest as little as possible. They decide on refrigeration systems based on price, not quality or possibilities. That's why building relationships is crucial. In Uzbekistan, for instance, Geerlofs has a contact person who keeps in contact with clients in the local language.

Only about five to ten percent of fruit traders can afford their own high-quality refrigeration systems. Pieter Jan says those companies that don't fall into this category work with simpler refrigeration systems. Or they hire a cold store from a larger fellow trader. "Medium-sized growers have cooling cells. But, they don't have enough product to fill them. So they buy from other growers. Or smaller local growers will rent that space and store part of their production there," concludes Pieter Jan.

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