

Firm helps importers clear customs

By TIM LINDEN

The terrorist acts on U.S. soil on Sept. 11, 2001, did more than alter how people travel in this country; that day changed the way produce is imported into the United States.

"There was a time, before 9/11, when a guy could wake up one day and declare himself an importer and be up and running the next day," said Frank Ramos, owner, president and founder of The Perishable Specialist Inc., a Miami-based customs broker. "That is no longer the case."

Today there are many more checks and balances in place, making the use of a customs broker a no-brainer. "Right now I don't know anybody (in the Peruvian asparagus deal) that is acting as their own customs broker," he said. "Occasionally one of my customers will try it themselves to save money, but that doesn't bother me at all. Because they always come back and appreciate us that much more."

Like anything else, Mr. Ramos said that if one knows the ins and outs of the business, getting product into the United States through customs is not that difficult. "Just like your business," he said to this reporter. "I'm sure you can write a story pretty quickly. Ask me to do it and it is going to take all day."

As a customs broker, Mr.

Ramos takes control of the product when it arrives in the United States and shepherds it through the customs process. "Each product is different," he said. "Peruvian asparagus has to be fumigated before it can be cleared."

Logistically, The Perishable Specialist has started his work on each load well before it arrives. In the first place, he said new post-9/11 protocols require prior notice for any product that is coming into the United States. What that means is that both the exporter and the importer in any transaction have to be registered with U.S. Customs. When a deal has been made and the arrival date is imminent, the customs broker notifies U.S. Customs. "This is for traceability," Mr. Ramos said. "If anything were to happen with that load, U.S. Customs has a way to link it back to the exporter and importer."

Using an air shipment of asparagus from Peru as an example, Mr. Ramos said that he arranges for a refrigerated truck to meet the plane so that the pallets of asparagus can be immediately loaded on the truck. He has also arranged for a U.S. Department of Agriculture official to be on hand to seal the truck once it has been loaded. The specially designed trucks then go to the fumigation facility at the airport where the asparagus, still in the

truck, is fumigated. That is usually a two- or three-hour job, depending upon when the shipment arrives. A similar procedure is followed if the asparagus arrives via ocean liner in a container. Again, Mr. Ramos arranges for the container to be fumigated at the dock facility.

While the product is being fumigated, The Perishable Specialist is handling the paperwork so that the product can be released for sale as quickly as possible.

Since 9/11 there are more obstacles, but U.S. Customs has also developed a pre-approval systems that gives certified customs brokers an "express lane" through the process. Mr. Ramos explained that customs brokers are allowed to voluntarily become certified as C-T PATs, which are Customs Traders in Partnership Against Terrorism. These brokers have gone through extensive background checks and agreed to specific protocols regarding their hiring practices and their screening of potential customers. Once they are C-T PAT certified, their loads get special and, most importantly, quick treatment.

While Mr. Ramos and his 18 employees can work with product brought into the United States in any port, he does concentrate his efforts in Miami. "That's my bread and butter," he said.