



Produce Blueprints

A MAGAZINE FOR FRESH PRODUCE PROFESSIONALS September/October 2023

Industry Deep Dive

IFPA:
Synergies & Challenges
Careers in Produce:
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IFPA

Charting the synergies and challenges as integration continues

By KAREN RAUGUST

A merger between the United Fresh Produce Association (United Fresh) and the Produce Marketing Association (PMA) had been discussed for decades, and it finally happened with the official launch of the combined organization, the International Fresh Produce Association (IFPA), in January 2022.

There had been three failed attempts since the early 1990s, the last occurring 10 years ago, but the challenges of the pandemic seemed to be the catalyst for the two groups to finally come together.

In announcing the merger, then-board chairs Michael Muzyk, president of Baldor, who headed United Fresh, and Dwight Ferguson, president and CEO of the California Agricultural Leadership Foundation, who led PMA, said in a joint statement at the time that the “agreement reflects the ongoing commitment of both associations to deliver the highest level of value to members.


“Looking ahead,” the statement continued, “we believe we can accomplish that goal better together, building on the synergies and experience of our expert staffs, complementary education



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programs and member services, and a stronger voice in advocating for our industries.”

So, nearly two years into the merger, what does the industry think?

Is the IFPA firing on all cylinders, with its membership revved up about current and future plans? Or is there more work to be done?

Blueprints reached out to folks throughout the supply chain for their perspective, but first, a walk through the factors that finally pushed the two organizations to put their differences aside and come together for the future of the industry.

CONTEXT: FOOD INDUSTRY CONSOLIDATION

The move to finally merge took place during a long period of consolidation in food and agriculture associations, both regional and national, over the past 15 years.

In many industry segments, merging seemed to be the best solution for maximizing effectiveness and efficiency and reducing duplication of efforts.

The United Fresh Produce Association itself was formed in 2006 through the

merger of the United Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Association and the International Fresh-Cut Produce Association.

Around the same time, in 2007, the Food Products Association and the Grocery Manufacturers of America merged and became the Grocery Manufacturers Association, which has been called the Consumer Brands Association since 2020.

The mid-2010s were another period of consolidation, with notable mergers in food and ag associations like the Agribusiness Council of Indiana and Indiana Seed Trade Association in 2018, continuing as the Agribusiness Council of Indiana, while the Michigan Grocers Association and the Michigan Retailers Association also merged, with the former becoming a division of the latter.

Not all of the food-industry merger plans were completed successfully.

The Retailer-Owned Food Distributors & Associates announced it was merging with the National Grocers Association in 2019, but the merger was put on hold in 2020 and the two organizations remain separate.

The fresh produce industry associations were also unable to complete their attempts at merging until the IFPA finally came into being in 2022.

The most recent attempt was a decade ago, falling apart in July 2012 after 18 months of negotiations. United Fresh and PMA had also been in merger discussions twice before, in the early 1990s and the early 2000s, but nothing ultimately came of those attempts.



TRANSITION LEADERSHIP

Industry observers and some of those involved in the previous merger discussions attributed the 2012 failure to a disagreement over who should lead the merged organization.

But the vying for power that often occurs when two organizations combine was overcome and did not scuttle the most

recent attempt. In fact, industry experts who are happy with the merger credit sound leadership for its successes so far.

Cathy Burns, CEO of PMA, and Tom Stenzel, CEO of United Fresh, served as co-CEOs of the new organization for three months. Initially the plan had been for the co-CEOs to remain in place through 2022, but in March 2022 a year

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after the initial merger announcement, Burns became the sole CEO.

Stenzel served as a consultant for another three months before leaving the organization in June to form his own Washington, DC-based consulting firm, Stenzel Group, LLC.

For his part, Stenzel, who led United Fresh for nearly 30 years, considers the merger a success.

"The combination of United Fresh and PMA was a long time in coming, but it has truly served the fresh produce industry by creating one leading global association," he comments.

"Today's IFPA can have a singular focus on adding value to member companies and the industry overall," he continues.

"As I look at IFPA today, it's clear the team is building upon the best of both heritage associations. The IFPA is continuing to be a major voice on public policy, while also driving marketplace success for members across the entire supply chain.

"Leadership development continues to be a cornerstone of the new association, with overall education programs expanding.

"Finally, IFPA is committed to growing produce consumption around the world, creating a healthier future for consumers, the planet, and the industry overall—that's a legacy I will always be proud of," Stenzel concludes.

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IFPA

Kenny Lund, executive vice president of Allen Lund Company, LLC in La Canada, CA, who was on the board at United Fresh during the time of the last attempted merger, agrees. “The changes have been very good so far; it’s gone much better than I thought it would.”

“Cathy and Tom showed great leadership in setting up the new organization,” Lund adds, pointing out Stenzel’s generosity in leaving the organization soon after the transition to ensure a single person would lead the combined entity.

“I have tremendous respect for him, and I think he doesn’t get enough credit for what he’s done.”

Lund also likes what he sees in Burns’ current leadership. “Cathy is a tremendous listener and has tremendous energy,” he says. “She’s smoothed out the rough edges of joining two long-time organizations.”

EARLY ACHIEVEMENTS

Burns is proud of IPFA and its accomplishments so far.

“In coming together, we were able to leverage the combined expertise of our

legacy organizations while supporting our members with the services, insights, and connections they seek to grow their businesses—and ensuring that our role and voice as an industry has an even greater impact,” she says.

At the time the merger was announced, PMA and United Fresh outlined seven strategies that would dictate the combined group’s activities.

The first three of these strategies included serving all sectors of the global fresh produce and floral supply chains and growing global membership and participation; providing expertise and business solutions in all aspects of the industry, from food safety and supply chain management to sustainability and technology; and conducting government advocacy.

Then there’s bringing all sectors of the diverse supply chain together to support efficiency and profitability; engaging with global bodies and allied organizations on free trade, standards, harmonization, and global consumption growth; and enhancing business-to-business sales and marketing connections across the supply chain.

“Leadership development continues to be a cornerstone of the new association, with overall education programs expanding.”

The last and perhaps most pivotal tenet calls for creating consumer demand to increase sales and profitability for IFPA’s members.

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Retooled events and programs

In the two years since the merger was approved by the members of both groups, progress has been made in many of these areas.

For example, the organization has reimagined its events, including the sizeable annual expo in October, the Global Produce & Floral Show, which replaced PMA's Fresh Summit.

When announcing the Global Produce & Floral Show, Burns noted that the effort was not meant to be the Fresh Summit under a new name, but instead was a completely rethought show in keeping with the goals of the new organization.

This trade show is still supplemented by smaller events throughout the year, many of them international, including the new version of United Fresh's Washington Public Policy Conference in September, with a simplified name: the Washington Conference.

Lund says he appreciates the continuation of the annual Washington conference, which he believes was one of United Fresh's strongest initiatives. This shows the new organization is "speaking for

the growers and not just the retail side," he explains.

"Sellers and receivers and growers have different needs," he goes on to say, and appreciates that IFPA has been "dedicated to making sure it's cognizant of the outcomes of both."

In September 2022, the IFPA's Foundation for Fresh Produce—which replaced the United Fresh Start Foundation and the Center for Growing Talent by PMA—announced it would fold the Produce for Better Health Foundation (PBH) into the program.

Effective January 1, 2023, PBH became part of the Foundation for Fresh Produce, coming full circle from its origins as an offshoot of PMA.

The mission is not new: the previous foundations were created to improve consumption and access to fresh fruits and vegetables, while providing plenty of educational materials for retailers and consumers along the way.

The "Have A Plant" movement from PBH continues post-merger and may expand into other territories outside the United States, though not everyone is

Since the merger, IFPA, like United Fresh before it, is continuing to make its presence known in Washington, DC with lobbying efforts.

enamored with the tagline—believing it causes confusion for consumers with plant-based alternatives to meat.


Another facet of IFPA is boosting its efforts in diversity, equity, and inclusion

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(DEI), developing a DEI Toolkit, and launching a new mentoring program at the 2023 IFPA Women's Fresh Perspectives Conference in Orlando.

In addition, IFPA expanded the reach of its volunteer leadership councils, adding both sustainability and controlled environment agriculture.

Lobbying and funding

Since the merger, IFPA, like United Fresh before it, is continuing to make its presence known in Washington, DC with lobbying efforts.

Mike O'Brien, vice president of Monterey Mushrooms, LLC in Watsonville, CA, cites several recent accomplishments, including six of IFPA's eight proposed Fruit and Vegetable Moonshot recommendations being incorporated into the White House's final national nutrition strategy.

He also mentions IFPA leadership on three White House-endorsed commitments in support of these strategies, release of the group's comprehensive economic impact report, and receiving government funding for various initiatives including talent attraction and development, expanded food safety education, and climate-smart agricultural practices.

The climate-smart funding, which could total as much as \$15 million, was attached to a pilot project called "A Vibrant Future," meant to incentivize specialty crop growers to adopt sustainable production techniques.

Produce companies supporting the pilot project include Bland Farms, LLC; Wm. Bolthouse Farms, Inc.; Calavo Growers, Inc.; Driscoll's, Inc.; Limoneira Company; Monterey Pacific, Inc.; Sun Pacific Marketing Cooperative, Inc., and more.

STREAMLINING SERVICES

Those who believe the merger has been positive for the industry cite the streamlining of member services and the logistics of membership as a key advantage.

"For our members, the combined association has removed the duplication of efforts—be they advocacy or trade shows and conferences or other programs, for example—which then provides stronger forums for supply chain leaders to come together to connect and do business," Burns says.

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“We continue to see strong interest in joining IFPA from those who are not members already,” she adds.

Less is more

The streamlining has made it easier to support the organization’s initiatives, some industry leaders say.

“There’s more focus from the industry on how to best participate and support our industry-leading association, since we don’t have to allocate resources and/or allegiances to more than one now,” observes Jin Ju Wilder, vice president of marketing and business development at Vesta Foodservice in Santa Fe Springs, CA, and a former chair of PMA’s board of directors.

“What I’ve seen with IFPA is that the single association has benefitted from the combined staff’s varied experiences and perspectives,” she continues.

“The expanded network of relationships and resources has increased opportunities for the organization to learn from and also influence key stakeholders both within and outside the industry.

“I think the organization continues to improve in providing data analysis and consumer insights that help member companies be better informed and make good decisions,” Wilder says.

Steve Grinstead, CEO at FreshEdge, LLC in Indianapolis, IN, is of the same mind. “The combined association eliminated the need for many companies to have to choose between being a member of one or the other.

“The IFPA has carried on most events from both associations,” he says, “which has allowed many members to experience new events they did not previously attend, providing for new experiences and new relationships.”

O’Brien concurs, especially on having a single list of signature events, a single set of dues, and a single foundation.

“The IFPA has carried through a variety of events and networking opportunities,” he says, “which has let industry members who may have attended only United Fresh or only PMA events participate more and make new connections.”

Kevin Brooks, chief revenue and marketing officer at Procurant in Watsonville, CA, puts it this way: “As a sponsor and attendee of the shows, it’s much nicer that they’re together—there’s less duplication of events.”

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One criticism Lund has about the early shows right after the merger was the placement of longtime exhibitors.

“They wanted the sellers to be prominent, but they forgot about ancillary companies like ours,” he recalls. “The companies that have supported both organizations deserve to be noticed.”

He notes, however, that IFPA staff has been communicative and supportive about issues such as these. “They listened and have taken great pains to address everyone’s concerns.”

A SINGLE VOICE

Many industry insiders applaud having a single, united voice as one of the most positive results of the merger.

“Our history of collaboration with a variety of stakeholders inside and outside the produce and floral industries is creating meaningful impact across all segments and geographies,” Burns says.

“One key difference is how IFPA is being seen by external collaborators,” she points out. “We’re being invited to more tables where discussions on nutrition, sustainability, technology, and innovation are being held.

“We remain steadfast in fighting for our policy priorities on Capitol Hill—be they the Farm Bill, nutrition and growing consumption, infrastructure and transportation, fresh produce workforce, food safety, or organics—we’ve doubled our investment in this critical area.”

“With a unified approach, we’ve seen that the industry has been able to gain more traction on important issues.”



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Grinstead, who was a longtime proponent of the merger and involved in two of the previous attempts to bring United Fresh and PMA together, agrees.

"We now have one voice in IFPA that can better position our industry and issues with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Food and Drug Administration, Congress, and the Biden administration."

"With a unified approach, we've seen that the industry has been able to gain more traction on important issues like labor and immigration, nutrition, and supply chain challenges," agrees O'Brien.

"United Fresh has always been known for great advocacy work, and PMA had a clear connection to the global supply chain," he adds. "Now, members can benefit from all of that work under one banner."

Wilder says, "It's led to the association having more confidence as the leading voice for our industry. The IFPA is seen as the industry partner needed at the table by government agencies and at global discussions about the future of food."

She mentions the group's advocacy on food policy, regulation, nutrition standards, and other topics as a strength.

O'Brien believes combining the Produce for Better Health Foundation and the Foundation for Fresh Produce is similarly beneficial. "The addition of PBH to the association gives us a one-voice focus on growing consumption," he says.

"They're doing a good job of being the voice of the grower, especially in Washington, DC," observes Lund, but cautions, "they always need to remember to be the voice for everybody."

MERGER OR TAKEOVER?

When it comes to the mechanics of the PMA and United Fresh merger, there's no disputing that it was a massive undertaking.

"All mergers are painful, and the teams of both associations have had to endure the pain of extreme change," acknowledges Grinstead. "Cathy and Tom did an awesome job of leading the group through that journey, but it's tough."

"It's positive overall, and it's good for the industry that they're moving forward in a more coordinated manner," weighs in Brooks, who has been engaged with both PMA and United Fresh for more than a decade.



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"They're doing a good job of integrating in the ways important to us, like traceability, Food Safety Modernization Act rules, grower tech adoption, and retail thinking about the supply chain," he explains.

"Those were important to both organizations and now to the joined organization."

But Brooks, like other industry experts, points out that the two organizations had different missions and different cultures. "PMA was the big glitzy one, and United Fresh was more policy-oriented," he says.

One of the biggest concerns from industry members who are less positive about the direction of the merged organization to date is their perception of an unequal footing between PMA and United Fresh during the integration.

Both organizations had distinct priorities, constituencies, and strengths and weaknesses, and it's been said PMA's side of things or agenda is taking precedence.

"United Fresh really got lost in the merger," says one industry leader.

Another fear among observers is that the combined organization is not spending enough time on developing year-round relationships with its members beyond the shows, as United Fresh did in the past.

"If they don't do this, they will lose members to smaller regional organizations," comments one produce industry member. "It's not the same as before, where it was a true member organization. It's more transactional now, and not authentic."

"I understand the possible benefits of the merger and was actually suggesting it for years," says another produce industry executive. "I also know that competition can keep companies sharp and humble. I hope we're able to see more of United Fresh's culture and service attitude shine through."

"It was positioned as a merger, but it feels more like an acquisition," he adds.

A WISH LIST FOR THE FUTURE

As the dust fully settles from the merger, members of the fresh produce community are looking to IFPA to address a number of issues critical to the industry going forward.

"The IFPA has made strides in providing leadership and networking in the areas of sustainability and DEI, so I'm hoping for continued improvement there," shares Wilder.



“I think there’s still room to grow IFPA’s role in advancing knowledge and use of technology in agriculture,” she continues. “And there’s opportunity to help with marketing acumen to improve industry performance overall.”

For Brooks of Procurant, technology needs some attention, pointing out an array of concerns and opportunities regarding technology, from security to artificial intelligence.

He insists the produce industry is way behind on these issues compared to other industries—like still talking about how to connect EDI (electronic data interchange) systems rather than about leading-edge issues. “I’d like to see a more modernized view of technology as a whole.”

Lund says he would like to see the organization get more involved in political issues, not only at the national level, but in producing and importing states like California, Florida, and Texas.

He notes that state regulations have a big impact on farmers, transportation, and other components of the produce supply chain, citing climate regulations in California, which he describes as unrealistic and onerous for trucking and logistics companies like his.

Burns acknowledges the breadth of companies comprising the industry from farm to table and that they represent a key component of IFPA’s success going forward. Fortunately, she says many industry members have already stepped up.

“I think there’s still room to grow IFPA’s role in advancing knowledge and use of technology in agriculture.”

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Current Priorities

The International Fresh Produce Association's priorities for 2023, according to the organization's CEO Cathy Burns, include:

Targeted outreach, programs, content, and workplans to increase IFPA's international presence. The association has connected members at forums in Germany and Australia-New Zealand and submitted format comments on sustainable fresh produce packaging, safety, and quality concerns to the European Commission, and advocated for sustainability innovation in front of heads of state and ministers at the AIM for Climate Summit.

Laying the foundation to address sustainability challenges in packaging and foster climate-smart production practices. The IFPA is chairing the Consumer Goods Forum Sustainable Supply Chain Initiative working group on environmental standards, as well as working with its partners on the USDA climate-smart grant program. It launched the second cohort of the Fresh Field Catalyst Accelerator, which brings together ag-tech companies from Belgium, Chile, England, Scotland, and Israel, as well as the United States and Canada.

Implementing the year-one goals of the White House Nutrition Conference Policy and Industry Moonshots through advocating with regulators and policymakers, as well as reaching broader audiences through forums such as the Agri-Pulse Summit, focused on food as medicine.


Advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) through industry talent attraction and development initiatives, education programs, and membership. The organization is developing a DEI Toolkit for members and serves as a collaborative partner in the USDA's Regional Food Business Center program. It also launched a mentorship program at the IFPA Women's Fresh Perspectives Conference in April 2023.

Laying the groundwork for the strategic direction of the Foundation for Fresh Produce and delivering consumer-focused programs like the PBH Consumer Connection Conference to the United States, as well as exploring expansion of such programs into other markets. The foundation board and staff have met with the Eat Well Global consultancy about identifying potential collaborators in bringing its initiatives to a non-U.S. audience.

"In addition to our programs and events being oversold, we are very blessed to have an overabundance of members who want to help IFPA lead and grow its influence and relevance by serving on our many councils, committees, and task forces," she says.

So, it would seem, as IFPA nears the end of its second full year of existence, most are positive about the merger and what has been accomplished so far.

Of course, there's much more on IFPA's plate for 2024 and well beyond—and most industry insiders believe the merger gives the new organization a better chance of succeeding on all levels.

O'Brien is enthused about the future but has a caveat: "The association has a transformational leader in Cathy Burns, and great staff, but we must understand that we in the produce and floral industry are IFPA. The membership and volunteer leadership drives the strategy and execution—so don't sit on the sidelines." 

Karen Raugust is a freelance writer who covers business topics ranging from retailing to the food industry.