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**Company mergers boost international competitiveness of the tomato processing industry in Northern Italy. Enterprises’ perspective at an Interbranch Organization’s conference.**

**"**Challenges and prospects for the tomato processing industry.", it is the title of a panel discussion among business managers organized by the Interbranch Organization of Northern Italy in Piacenza during Tomato World in order to assess the impact of recent company takeovers and mergers on the health of the supply chain and its competitiveness. The round table, moderated by **the President of the Interbranch Organization for processing tomato of Northern Italy Tiberio Rabboni**, was chaired by **Aldo Rodolfi,** President of Rodolfi Mansueto; Dario Squeri, Administrator of Steriltom and Italtom; Costantino Vaia, CEO of Consorzio Casalasco del Pomodoro; Per Paolo Rossetti, General Manager of Conserve Italia Soc. Coop. Agricola.

President Rabboni, after mentioning that in recent years several processing companies in Northern Italy have made significant acquisitions of previously independent establishments, invited all participants to argue the advantages of increasing company size and the way territory and supply chain should read this reorganization and merging of ownership structures. In Northern Italy, the latest mergers saw Rodolfi absorbing Von Felten, Mutti acquiring Copador, as Steriltom did with Ferrara Food, and Conserve Italia with OPOE and Casalasco taking over ARP, Emiliana Conserve and De Martino.

In the subsequent interventions, the speakers emphasized that mergers and acquisitions have primarily increased the international competitiveness of the area's productions, both because of the economies of scale, made possible by the new company sizes and because of the possibility of specializing in a production and supporting investments in research and development and in favour of increasing environmental, economic and social sustainability.

The takeovers, in some cases, involved companies in previous financial difficulties, which through absorption regained prospects and stability. In other cases, it was a natural "incorporation" carried out in a logic of continuity and development, which strengthened the structure of industrial transformation. Each company specialized in a precise market segment: private label or branded products, catering or industrial products, generating great value for the supply chain and mutual respect among the various players.

Such competitive reorganization process is based, in the opinion of the interveners, on solid relations between the agricultural and industrial parts, demonstrated by the consolidated presence of an Interbranch Organization to which all processing companies and all producer organizations in Northern Italy adhere, which, beyond the normal dialectics between competing companies, assures all protagonists the certainty of correct relations, which means compulsorily marked by transparency and loyalty.

Hence the industrial representatives' willingness to confirm and, if possible, strengthen the prerogatives of the interbranch organization. As for future prospects of the entire sector, much will depend on how the adaptation of infrastructure to climate change and the consequent recurring water crisis is concretely addressed by European, national and regional institutions and the Water Management Consortia.

It will be also decisive the defence and protection of the origin of the tomato used to produce its derivatives and the maintenance of the typical quality of made in Italy, two key points for the future, so that the Italian product can continue to stand out compared to the product of international competitors. It is a result which must also be pursued through the adoption by national institutions of measures and tools for the verification and control of the origin of tomato imported and marketed in Europe.

Press Office OI Pomodoro da Industria Nord Italia

Veronica Fumarola

Tel. +39 389 5512745

[stampa@oipomodorodaindustrianorditalia.it](mailto:stampa@oipomodorodaindustrianorditalia.it)