

RETIREMENT

# FARM FRESH CHIEF WILL STEP DOWN AFTER 12 YEARS

**By Carolyn Shapiro**

## **The Virginian-Pilot**

Ron Dennis, who has served as president of the Farm Fresh supermarket chain for more than 12 years, announced Monday he will retire at the end of the week.

Supervalu Inc., the chain's parent company, will name a successor at a later date, the company said in a written statement. Brian Huff, Supervalu's senior vice president of specialty retail, will take over Farm Fresh's operations in the interim.

The regional chain is based in Virginia Beach and has 45 stores in Hampton Roads, Richmond and Elizabeth City, N.C.

Dennis, 65, started in the supermarket business 52 years ago as a meat cutter apprentice at the Publix chain, according to Supervalu. In late 1997, he joined Farm Fresh as president after food distributor Richfood Holdings Inc. announced plans to buy the regional supermarkets, which were then headquartered in Norfolk.

Before that, Dennis served as president of Kash n' Karry Supermarkets, a subsidiary of Food Lion, based in Tampa, Fla. He previously spent most of his career at the Florida division of Albertsons, a chain that Supervalu bought in 2006. Publix Super Markets Inc. bought Albertsons' 49 stores in Florida in 2008.

Both Dennis and Supervalu officials declined to comment on his departure, Farm Fresh spokeswoman Susan Mayo said. In the company's statement, Dennis said he is looking forward to spending more time with his family.

Dennis took over a grocery retailer in rocky financial shape. Farm Fresh filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in January 1998, overwhelmed by debt from a 1988 leveraged buyout. Richfood, based in Richmond, bought most of Farm Fresh's assets.

Farm Fresh's sales had slipped amid heavy local competition, and Dennis was tasked with boosting its position. In 1997, Farm Fresh had lost its No. 1 spot in local grocery store market share to Food Lion. Farm Fresh remains in second place after Food Lion, which has almost twice as many stores, but Farm Fresh has narrowed the gap considerably in recent years, according to Food World, an industry publication that releases annual market surveys.

Supervalu, the grocery distribution giant based in Eden Prairie, Minn., bought Farm Fresh along with the rest of the Richfood operations in 1999.

Dennis oversaw a largescale remodeling of stores throughout the region. He brought the first supermarket in 30 years to Norfolk's Berkley neighborhood, returned the chain to northeastern North Carolina, and opened the first Farm Fresh in downtown Norfolk, called The Market at Harbor Heights under a new banner for the chain, in fall 2007.

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