Blueberry bud development in southern Chile is advanced by two weeks compared to the same period last year, according to a Santiago-based consultant.

Curry & Co consultant Todd Mauritz has told *www.freshfruitportal.com* the fruit might not necessarily ripen early, but if conditions hold up there is strong potential for production overlap with the country's central valley.

"What we've seen in the south, personally and from my discussions with a series of growers, is a general trend that they are more advanced phenologically than they were last year – flower bud development is more advanced by a couple of weeks than it was last year," he says.

Todd Mauritz

"This is due to a very mild and warmer than usual spring. It's not to say there won't be more climatic events, more cold freezes that could drastically set this back.

"It's earlier and it's going to be very interesting to see how it will play out should it stay the same way in a harvest in the south potentially overlapping with harvests in the central valley, which would mean a lot of volume at one time being harvested."

He highlights the Duke blueberry variety as one that looks particularly early this year.

Northern production and air freight

He says blueberry harvesting has already begun in the country's north and there is likely to be an increase in air freight exports to make the most of current prices.

"The fruit is there and it looks good. Last week they had a cold front that slowed things down a little bit for about five days, but there's fruit coming out of Chile now; Oneal is harvesting, and Jewell and Star will be close to follow in areas like Ovalle, Quillota and Villa Alemana.

"Fruit will come further down until the end of October, with notable volumes hitting in the first week of November and arriving in the states two weeks after that. In mid-November the United States will start getting the fruit.

"In the second week of November, depending on pricing if it holds up, it's going to be sent by plane - plane exports have started happening and they will continue until the middle of October to the end of November."

Photo: Vitatalks

He says the Argentine deal will likely impact on returns to the Chilean industry and logistical challenges remain, but Chile seems to be more prepared for volumes this year in terms of capacity.

"I've spoken to the guys like Integrity, Tightpac and Impac and they've indicated they've taken steps to ensure that they have bigger stock ready and are going to be running at a high production level, which is going to be interesting.

"If the south really does come early and coincides more with the central valley and there's a lot of overlap, that means there's all of a sudden a lot more fruit out there which means a lot more cargos.

"IQF (Individually Quick Frozen) pricing is key and stores will fill up. People can only store so much frozen fruit here in Chile and get it out, so there's a capacity level that will be addressed in the future but it's still a problem; people will fill up what they need on the IQF programs and then they'll just close the doors and say we're not accepting any more IQF, and it will be really one day to the next."

The first 'quantifiable' Asian impact

Mauritz says the blueberry industry has ramped up its Asian programs which will hopefully lead to better prices as a side-effect in the U.S.

"A lot of Chilean companies are looking to go to Asia, which could possibly alleviate a lot of problems and open up a lot more storage capacity and sales capacity, so , I think this might be one of the first noticeable seasons where you see a quantifiable Asian impact.

"That will actually do well for pricing in the United States because if supply is being diverted away from America going over to China, and people aren't spending as much in the United States, it's hard to come by, then their prices go up - that's what we're hoping for to stay competitive.

"This is going to be a very interesting year as there are a lot of factors now - a good season climatically, a good fruit load, a very concerted effort over the last three years to ensure that problems don't happen which hopefully will be the case this year, there's more access to the market than before, and there's been advancements in technology. Everything is continuing to head in the right path."

He adds that Chile has received a strong boost from Asian buyers who have raised concerns over the quality of fumigated Argentine blueberries.

"The Asian countries have vocalized that they're not going to be accepting big amounts of Argentinean fruit, because its been fumigated, it takes too long to get over there and even though it's a few weeks earlier, they prefer to wait.

"That means that Asia is now 100% focused on Chile, there's no Argentinean competition."

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