


Fruit industry consultant Dick Spezzano says Latin American melon exporters would be best finding alternative markets to the U.S., following the recent listeria outbreak from a Colorado farm. 

Spezzano has told *www.freshfruitportal.com* the canteloupe market has 'collapsed' after the scare, which has resulted in 125 cases and 23 deaths.

"There's some sales but there's not any meaningful sales - sometimes you make all your money at the beginning of the season and then at the end, but the heart of the season is moving product and in the west side of the Joaquin Valley in California they still had a lot of production left," he says.

"They still had as much as six weeks of production, and now they'll walk away from those fields because the market price went from US\$10-12 down to US\$4-5, and they still couldn't sell it."

He says California's elevated areas are now entering melon production along with Arizona, and it is unlikely the market will have changed a great deal by the time offshore arrivals start in late October.

"My sense tells me what will happen is that the paintbrush gets painted pretty broadly, and I'm going to give you an example - let's say a retailer is selling 100 cases and sales go down to 20 cases. What might happen is that you then get up to 25 to 30, but it takes time.

"In that example, it may not get up to 100 cases for six months to a year, who knows? We saw that with spinach in 2006 - it's only been in the last couple of years that the retailers tell me they're back to their sales pre-spinach problem.

"That's three years to struggle and I'm hoping that's not true of cantaloupe, I'm hoping that's not true. It's a huge commodity, and that will affect offshore, absolutely, like Guatemala, Mexico, Costa Rica."

Spezzano hopes the situation will pick up from current limited demand, but any foreign melon exporters should look to their domestic consumers or different export markets.

"There's very limited demand and hopefully that will pick up, but what's going to happen is where it usually starts off at \$14 or some place around there, it will not because the retailers will stock it and put it in there, but they won't get a lot of repeat business because the consumer is not pulling it through.

"And then what happens is because of that you're not getting turnover, so the retailers taking a higher shrink, because it travels a long way anyway, and any product has limited shelf life.

"If they (Latin American growers) want advice, I'd say hopefully they have an alternative place they can go with with that fruit."

### **Food Safety Act amendment under fire**

Spezzano says the recent outbreak shows the small farming exceptions to the Food Safety Act last year were misguided, even if the concerned Colorado farm did not fall under that exemption.

"There's an amendment act that got in at the 11th hour, the Tester Amendment, and it exempted small farms which you should never do as they have the highest chance of having a problem - they say they can't burden that, but it's not a matter of burdening. It's a food safety issue.

"Think of a small farm with 10 acres, cows right next to it, they've got a well, so you could really get contamination very easily. They're just going to have to get better agricultural practices - we still haven't heard from the USDA (United States Department of Agriculture) what caused it, but my sense tells me it probably had something to do with water.

"In California in general they don't wash their melons and the reason for that is they say you have a higher degree of chance of getting that problem when you're washing them; they need to be dried."

He highlights that the farm of origin for the disease has a very small annual output that doesn't even reach a day's production in the Joaquin Valley.

"So it can be a very small farm that ruins the industry like that."

Photo: Central America Data

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