

As another season gets into full gear, Mexico's mango producers are looking at opportunities in Asia, but many admit improvements are needed before more expansion can take place.

Beginning around mid-February and typically ending in mid-June, Mexico's mango season produces fruit traditionally shipped north to the US and Canada, with remaining volumes sold on the national market. 

However, the country's producers are increasingly looking to Asia, and specifically Japan, for future growth, with many attracted by the promise of better returns and more stable arrangements with clients.

This is certainly the case for Michoacán-based Fresh Directions, which is aiming to build on the 120 tons (MT) of mangoes it sent to Japan last season. The company, which also has significant operations in the Dominican Republic, currently exports approximately 12-13 container loads of mangoes, as well as considerable volumes of avocados to Canada each year.

The firm's Miguel Angel Bucio says Japan is very much an area of future focus.

"We're very interested in Japan and have already sent some volumes there. The returns are better than other markets and the clients there are very loyal and look to work in the long term," he says.

"At the moment, the best products are going to Japan and we hope this business is going to increase because volumes are still relatively small."

The company, which has some 16 years in the market, has a wide range of certifications, including Primus SCF, HAACP, Mexico Calidad Suprema and the Bio Agricert organic standard for production that is mainly focused on the Hayden and Tommy Atkins varieties.

However, Bucio says the future health of not just Fresh Direction, but the entire Mexican mango sector depends on quality and safety standards being raised across the country and especially in the production heartland of Michoacán.

"Our challenge as a sector is to maintain the number of mango groves because this has decreased over recent years, while also strengthening the quality of mangoes in Michoacán," he says.

"We need to improve and standardize quality, so that growers can receive a fair price for

good-sized, good quality volumes, so that they don't have to change to growing another product.

"We can only achieve this by working together because at the moment everyone just looks at what is most convenient for them and if we don't work together the situation is not going to change."

According to Armando Celis, president of Mexican mango association Emex, the country's mango producers anticipate this year to export up to 10 percent more than last year's 60 million 9-pound cartons, depending on prices.

As with much of its fresh produce, the overwhelming recipient for the bulk of these exports is the US, followed by Canada with around five million cartons, and smaller volumes to Europe and Japan.

Although Celis says Emex keeps member growers up-to-date on potential opportunities in markets of interest, such as Asia and South America, he says the association as yet does not have a specific project aimed at increasing sales outside North America.

Of course, there have been question marks raised - not least in the US - about food safety practices among Mexico's mango sector, especially in the wake of last year's salmonella scare, linked to an exporter in northern Sinaloa state.

Celis is keen to highlight the fact that Emex is working to help its members achieve certification for their packhouses, adding that by the end of the current season, all associated growers are expected to be certified for risk reduction systems by Mexican food safety authority Senasica. He also adds that a number of the organization's members already have Primus and GlobalGAP certification.

Despite this, Celis admits that the principal challenge for Mexico's mango sector as a whole remains to improve food safety.

Mauricio Mendoza from Mango San Andrés, a company that sources its volumes from around 110 small producers in Michoacán, says adapting to new food safety regulations at an international level is very much a challenge for the sector. He adds that his company is working toward achieving GlobalGAP certification to address just such challenges.

However, Mendoza says weather-related problems have also proved to be a challenge during the season to date, causing a delay to harvesting and several stoppages in order to allow time for the fruit to mature.

In common with Mango San Andrés, Jalisco-based Elite Produce has the North American market as its primary focus. In its case, however, Canada rather than the US is its most significant export destination, with 80 percent of its exports sent to the country.

As a company, Elite Produce currently draws its production from 459 hectares of mango groves - both its own production and that of associated growers - from the states of Michoacán, Nayarit, Sinaloa and Guerrero.

However, the company's general manager, Andres Palacios, says several markets outside of North America are becoming increasingly interesting for the firm, namely Europe and Japan. In fact, Europe now accounts for around 10 percent of Elite Produce's total mango exports only a year after beginning direct shipments to the continent.

To date, Palacios says the current season has progressed well, with the firm hopeful that it will double or triple its sales to Europe over the course of 2013 depending on the size of the harvest. It is also exploring the possibility of starting direct exports to Japan.

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