

As notable blueberry producers in South America, Argentina and Uruguay have faced the impact of rising labor and production costs, fluctuation in monetary exchange rates and reduced acreage dedicated to production. 

At the International Blueberry Organization (IBO) Summit in Santiago de Chile, representatives from both countries spoke on the current state of their respective industries, including challenges and prospects that lay ahead.

Marta Bentancur of Uruguay's Fruit Producers and Exporters Union (UPEFRUY) elaborated on a series of global challenges, such as labor costs and availability of production zones. Much like neighboring Argentina, Uruguay also faces high air and maritime transportation costs and a less-than-favorable exchange rate for the local peso, she explained.

Over the years, Uruguay has transitioned to new varieties. Bentancur said that country went from 70% O'Neal to 60% of production coming from varieties like Emerald, Star, Misty and Jewel.

The same trend has been observed in Argentina. Jorge Pazos of the Argentinean Blueberry Committee said that producers who have stuck by their orchards have changed varieties to improve production and offer fruit at an ideal time to market.

Pazos explained that while the number of blueberry hectares had increased from the 1999 value of 300ha, planted area dropped from its 2010 peak of 3,200ha to 2,600ha in 2012.

"In 2010, we were growing and then it all begins to stall. Over the last three years, the quantity of exported fruit in tons is practically the same or similar and the surface area has diminished 40%," Pazos said.

There have also been notable changes in fruit export destinations. In the last few years, Uruguay has sent a greater volume to the European Union rather than the United States and the Asian market is developing.

"Europe is growing and it looks like it will continue to do so," Bentancur said.

### **Challenges for the future**

Labor costs, stagnant volume and an unfavorable macroeconomic situation have laid their mark on the Argentine blueberry industry.

"Seen this way, it is not encouraging. Although we are convinced that it is always possible

and something more can be done, which is to continue working to sustain this industry that began a few years ago," Pazos said.

Pazos added that it is interesting to see Argentina continuing to sell fruit in an important business window.

"Efficiency is what has done it the last few years. To survive this adverse macroeconomic situation affecting our country, undoubtedly the producer has achieved becoming more efficient," Pazos said.

"Of course this, alongside conversion, looks to improve the season to get better prices."

He expected Argentina to continue to offer a viable alternative in the industry.

In Uruguay's case, Bentancur explained that one of the most delicate parts of the export sector is that shipments begin slowly in September and peak in October through December.

She emphasized, however, that the country has the benefit of producing during the counter season. Despite being a small producer, she added that Uruguay utilizes production technology, has postharvest "know how", has an advanced packing infrastructure, offers quality service and has not had phytosanitary problems, among other characteristics.

Bentancur said production is not expected to increase in the short run except for in those new varieties being pursued by businesses.

"We believe that the change of varieties will improve quality and distribution in the long run. Europe is seen as a main market in the coming years," she said.

Current goals for the Uruguayan sector include being able to rely on better varieties adapted for postharvest, producing firmer and more attractive fruit, improving labor efficiency and moving toward maritime transport.

"One of the characteristics we have in Uruguay - and perhaps a difference with Argentina - is a vertical integration model," she said.

"That gives us some advantages from a fruit management and arrival point of view, because you can manipulate the process more easily."

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