

Thanks in large part to guest worker programs, the Canadian blueberry industry avoids the labor shortage issues that slow down production in many other countries, explained B.C. Blueberry Council chair Mike Makara at the International Blueberry Organization (IBO) Summit in Santiago de Chile. 

"We have no labor problems. We are stretched sometimes but we have access to SAWP, which is the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program, in cooperation with the Canadian government and the Mexican embassies," he explained, referring to the British Columbia industry in particular.

The program provides accommodation, transportation from Mexico and other participating countries, health insurance and other benefits for seasonal workers that he said have farmers mostly covered.

Even with the benefit of accessible labor, however, not everything in the industry is easy. Later Makara explained to *www.freshfruitportal.com* that sheer growth may create a sustainability challenge.

"We might have an issue because there is such substantial growth in our industry. I think we're still going to continue growing minimum 8 to 10 or 11% every year. I would say probably for the next five or six years, maybe longer," he said.

Canada ranks as the second biggest blueberry producer in world, just behind the United States. In 2012, Canada produced 112,363 MT of blueberries, according to the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization. The biggest producing regions were Ontario, Nova Scotia, Quebec and British Columbia, the largest production zone with 9,326 hectares and 883 growers.

Production in British Columbia has risen steadily over the last few years, with about 60% of blueberries currently going to processing.

To expand on production even more, he said growers in the province are trying out new varieties to push the season even longer. Top planted varieties are Duke, Bluecrop and Elliot with interest as well in Hardy Blue, Reka, Draper and Liberty varieties.

He explained that beyond September, conditions make it difficult to produce high quality fruit, which encourages processing rather than fresh sales.

Cost also makes it difficult for growers to begin the initial expansion phase.

"A challenge is the high cost of land. You can pay \$80,000 for an acre of land even if you buy 50 or 100 acres and that's bear. Then you spent another \$15,000 to \$20,000 an acre to develop that, so before you start you've spent \$100,000 an acre. The off set of that is, our productivity per acre is high, so we can manage it," he said.

Productivity and quality control have made it possible for Canada and British Columbia in particular to establish international trade partners. The country's biggest buyers right now are the U.S., Japan and the U.K.

Makara was confident that China will soon become the next big market. He estimated that China would accept Canadian blueberries in 12 to 24 months.

"We have made several attempts and our executive director has been quite aggressive lately going to Hong Kong for meetings, and to Korea. The result of that, with some cooperation from our government minister, we have got the Chinese AQSIQ people, the ones that were instrumental in signing the final approval for Chilean blueberries," he explained to the website.

"So they came to Vancouver less than a month ago. I was there with our executive director, met them, made a presentation. That's my feeling. Our executive director said 12 months, I'm saying, well there's always the excuse of MRLs and other people alluded to that, so I'm saying 12 to 24."

If Canada can strike a deal with China, the North American nation will come onto the market at the same time as China's harvest celebration or Moon Festival, typically in September or early October.

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