

Low fruit availability and a weak rand are working in favor of South African apples and pears, as European importers look to fill grocery store shelves. 

Hortgro product manager Jacques du Preez explained that low carry-over from Northern Hemisphere crops sparked early interest in the South African offering and may even contribute to a record year of 15.5 million cartons for pear exports.

"U.K. apples are up and for U.K. pears, exports are up almost 40% to date. Also in continental Europe, pears are up 34% and apples are up almost 50%. You can see there's a big pull toward those markets," du Preez said.

Both apple and pear exports are up 15% to date on the previous season, he added.

Weather has also played a positive role in the season, with growers avoiding the typical summer heat and wind damage.

"Going back a while, we had a good winter last year with enough cold units, enough rain. Then during the spring and summer time we didn't have any real weather or climatic conditions that were detrimental to the crops," he said.

"Normally we have heat waves during January and February and wind damage. This year that was minimal. The conditions were close to perfect."

Seven Seas manager Willie Beets also described a solid season, aided by good weather and larger sized fruit.

"The market is very good. In South Africa, we are thankful for that and the rand is weak at the moment, which encourages exports. That helps with the high costs," Beets said.

Seven Seas focuses much of its apple and pear business on Russia where Beets said consumers are receiving more choices and upping their expectations.

"It has been an emerging market for a couple of years now. A lot of people saw that so a lot of people are now shipping to that market. The competition is growing and growing. It also depends on the strength of the ruble. When the ruble is stronger, export is better," Beets said.

"Over the last couple of years, because there is a lot of supply into that market, consumers have a choice. To have an edge, you've got to have good quality."

As for Hortgro, du Preez said the group has its fingers crossed for an opening into China.

"We've been busy with talks with China for 10 years, so we're getting to the final part of it. It will not be too long anymore," du Preez said.

"We were hoping for April, May already but you never know. We're really pushing and hoping for the end of the year."

Once China gives its approval, the product manager said South African producers are ready to jump on the opportunity.

"We have preregistered all of our orchards and farms that are planning or want to export to China. So from our side, we're really just waiting for them to give us the go ahead and we'll start exporting to them," he said.

www.freshfruitportal.com