

*Last season was the worst year in recent times for Chilean fresh raspberry exports in terms of volume, reaching a "radically low" level according to Natural Choice commercial manager Esteban Labra. However, his company has been working with growers to convert orchards to new varieties and regain lost markets.*

Labra explained poor seasons for Chilean fresh raspberry exports were due to a range of factors, and were particularly affected by what happens abroad with frozen raspberry stocks.

"If European frozen raspberry-growing countries and the U.S. - which also produces a lot of raspberries for freezing - have complications or low years, this means there's a low stock of frozen fruit and therefore the demand for frozen Chilean raspberries increases and this generates enormous speculation, where everyone buys at very high prices," he told [www.freshfruitportal.com](http://www.freshfruitportal.com).



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"Last year they came to pay CLP1,700 (US\$3) per kilo (2.2 pounds) in a sweep, not even with selection. At this price level, the grower is not interested in exporting fresh at all.

"Unfortunately we have been losing practically the whole [fresh] window from not having fruit. All we could do was frustrated by not having fruit because growers didn't want to pack....now, even if we manage to pay CLP3,300 (US\$5.96) per kilo in fresh, the growers still don't want to pack."

He said this was damaging as in a good year for frozen growers would go well, but in a bad year for frozen there wouldn't be a greater fresh window to develop.

The company, which Labra claimed was the leading exporter of fresh raspberries in Chile, exported 10 metric tons (MT) of the fruit last season, which was much less than in previous years.

"We've had around 5,000 or so cartons and we should have done a year with 120,000 cartons," he said, highlighting that in previous years the company had sent between 55,000-120,000 cartons of fruit."

Amid this backdrop, 1.5 years ago Natural Choice started a program with some growers to convert plants to new varieties that would allow them to be more competitive, with better

fruit for the fresh market. This was done with the support of the government-backed Agricultural Development Institute (INDAP) through a commercial partnership.

He said this has mostly been done with the Amira raspberry variety, but large volumes have not yet been seen as 2014 will likely be the first year with a considerable amount of fruit.



Natural Choice commercial manager Esteban Labra.

"It is a fruit that has a sufficient size to compete if it's worked with well, not for making the gigantic volumes as before, but for having certain windows that allow us to do business that is focused more on small growers," he said, adding the idea was to maintain the presence of Chilean raspberries in the market.

"This year we will receive the first harvests with the possibility of differentiation and doing specific shipments for this fruit.

"There are always markets that one can make the most of because there are always supermarkets that are depending on raspberries from California, so there are people who are interested in having a second raspberry option. The problem is that we don't have quality."

However, he said this could change with the introduction of Amira raspberries, bringing quality and size to the industry.

"With luck a Heritage raspberry weighs 1.5 grams. Amira can weigh five to six grams. It has another advantage in efficiency because it can be harvested with two hands. It is easily taken off the plant and yields per person with Amira should be almost double.

"We aim that we'll be able to commercialize the Amira raspberries we have planted at a good price with good profitability for the growers, and that we'll keep a presence in the market with raspberries.

While competing with raspberries from Mexico or California is difficult, the executive said he would find market niches to sell 200MT of fresh, and that the fruit would be sold without problems.

"With these new varieties we could also get back to what we had lost previously in Europe," he said, adding that it was unfortunately impossible for the Heritage variety to reach the old continent with good quality, and therefore most of Natural Choice's focus has been on the U.S. market.

"Now that these new varieties have a much longer post-harvest, you can have a program in Europe, making the most of the windows that are produced."

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