

From the middle of next month, Egyptian fruit producer and supplier Extreme starts its strawberry export schedule to markets including Europe, Russia and the Gulf regions. With around 90 metric tons (MT) of strawberries, the company is pushing its use of modified atmospheric technology (MAT) that allows the delicate soft fruit to be shipped by sea and arrive completely fresh at the other end. Here at www.freshfruitportal.com we spoke with the head of operations to find out more.

Expectations for this year's Egyptian strawberry export schedule look very promising, especially in light of the embargo prohibiting European competitors from supplying the Russian market where strawberries are in great demand. 

Cairo-based Extreme is promoting not only its strawberries that are grown on a network of farms in the north-eastern region of Ismaïlia and along an area known at the Cairo-Alexandria desert road, but the cost-effective method of shipping strawberries by sea as opposed to air freight.

Head of operations Riham George said that by using MAT, strawberries could be transported from Cairo to Europe by sea and arrive with the end-user in exactly the same high quality and fresh condition as if they were delivered using faster air transportation.

"As long as you do not interfere with the modified atmosphere cycle we have made for the container or the pallets, then it's good. We separate the strawberries from the outer atmosphere and adjust the conditions to make sure the strawberries do not mature or rot," she said.

"It's the same as if the strawberries had been picked from the farm. You can store them for 21 days transit time, plus maybe seven to 10 days more, so you can keep the strawberries for around 30 days as long as you do not interrupt the modified atmosphere conditions.

"We follow the correct procedures, like steps one, two, three and deliver strawberries to the supermarkets or the end customer and they receive the fruit which is completely fresh. It's all perfect and a much more cost-effective transport method."

Following a successful period of using the technology, Extreme wanted to really push shipments by sea this strawberry season because of the cost benefits to both supplier and end customer.

"It's been a great success so far with many satisfied customers, so this year we wanted to go for it," George said.

"We have to promote the advantages of using the technology and shipping by sea because some customers are shocked when they hear you want to transport strawberries by sea because - they may have questions regarding quality.

"The concept is unfamiliar to some customers so we have to convince them it's a good idea. Normally transporting strawberries by air is very costly so shipping by sea is a good option for both parties; for me as the shipper and the customer at the other end."

Taking advantage of the Russian embargo

George is putting together this year's export schedule with key target markets being the Netherlands, Italy, Russia and the U.K.

"We started to supply the Russian market with a small amount of strawberries last season and this year we are expanding because of the fact that Greek strawberries will not be supplied to Russia due to the ban. We certainly can take advantage of this opportunity.

"There is high demand in Russia so it's a very good market for us this year. Of course it's always a good market for the Gulf area. The minimum transport time for strawberries to Russia is seven or eight days.

"Elsewhere in Europe, Italy is a good market as well because shipping takes a transit time by ocean of between three to five days, and we need two days beforehand in Cairo for the preparation of the shipments and two or three days more in the receiving port to finish the custom clearance. The whole trip would be between seven and nine days."

Depending on weather conditions, Extreme's strawberry export schedule will last until next March, although last year it ran until May because of various factors which interrupted transportation.

"Because our strawberry season also overlaps with the Christmas period, there is high demand in the market and it is the peak time to supply markets," George said.

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