

The U.S. Highbush Blueberry Council (USHBC) is projecting North American production to grow by a quarter over the next four years to hit 940 million pounds (426,000 metric tons).

The association's head has also given a positive seasonal outlook and projected exports to rise in the coming years as access is gained to new markets.

Volumes this year from North America are anticipated to hit 750 million pounds (340,000MT), with global blueberry production expected to surpass 1.4 billion pounds.

Fresh blueberry sales at U.S. retail rose 7% year-on-year to reach US\$1.5 billion in 2015, with frozen sales growing 4% to US\$190 million.

Speaking to *www.freshfruitportal.com*, USHBC executive director Mark Villata said demand in the U.S. should be able to keep up with supply in the coming years.

"We've seen some strong growth over the last several years, there's no reason to think that growth won't continue," he said.

"If you look at annual U.S. per-capita consumption right now it's about 45 ounces per person, or 4 pint-size clam shell packs, so I think we have a lot more room to grow."

North American per-capita blueberry consumption grew nearly 50% between 2010-2015.

### **New markets on the horizon**

At present only 10% of the total U.S. highbush crop is exported annually, but Villata said with overseas promotional programs and new markets likely to open soon, this figure was set to grow.

"We're putting more programs in place to try to increase consumption overseas. We're doing work in places like Japan, Taiwan, India and South Korea.

"We're also working on trying to open markets that don't currently allow fresh U.S. imports of blueberries, particularly in China, the Philippines, Vietnam, New Zealand and Australia.

"So we're undergoing the process to try to encourage access to those markets, then once we get into them that will considerably increase the amount of product that goes offshore."

He said Vietnam looked like it would be the next market to open, while access to China may be just a couple of years away.

## **Seasonal outlook**

With regards to this current season, Villata said that on the whole the crop looked to be coming on at similar timings to last year, with small year-on-year production variations in certain regions.

"It looks like the crop's going to come in a little bit less than anticipated in Georgia and Florida, but other regions seem to be fairly consistent in their production," he said.

He said there was a build-up of frozen inventory, which could be a concern, but there were no issues in the fresh sector.

"Fresh demand continues to be strong. Timing could be a concern if a lot of the regions have berries come off at the same time - that could cause some disruption in the market - but so far so good," he said.

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