

In a dispute that has now been going on for 38 days, a truck driver strike in Colombia is pushing growers to the limit by cutting off key routes to both domestic and overseas markets.

Government representatives and transport sector leaders have failed to reach an agreement with negotiations now paralyzed, while the conflict has also led to acts of violence and repression according to local press reports.

Truck driver unionists claim the government of Juan Manuel Santos has not complied with two agreements reached with the union, covering issues including tolls, payments, gas prices and freight rates.

Colombian Horticultural Association (Asohofrucol) managing director Alvaro Palacio told www.freshfruitportal.com the strike has meant the normal flow of movement has been obstructed for different crop harvests from around Colombia.

Palacio said the ports were 100% operational, but the problem was that fruit wasn't arriving.

"The trucker strike is affecting all sectors, but our sector is for highly perishable products, which are lost if they aren't harvested, transported and sent to the final consumer, and that's what's happening," he said.

"Fruit hasn't been able to be transported from the interior of the country and from productive zones to the ports. The problem is serious because the truck drivers don't work, the fruit doesn't move and it stays in the orchards, farms and post-harvest zones.

"We haven't been able to send oranges, mandarins and lemons to Ecuador because of the strike. What's aggravating is that the truck drivers speak about the right to protest and we agree with that, but without violence, and we have asked them that they let transporters who want to do it so that it doesn't affect other sectors of the economy."

The conflict has also affected Colombian consumers as there are no frequent transport services to the large cities.

"The fruit is not arriving in the way it should," Palacio said, adding the sector was not 100% paralyzed.

"There is some transport between intermediate cities, but there are problems in some cities more than others, like in Nariño and Cauca."

When asked about commitments with buyers overseas, the situation is not looking rosy.

"Exporters are not able to comply with their contracts on time because they haven't been able to transport fruit to the ports in a timely way. Many have been affected," he said.

"A lot of orchards don't have cold chain systems to keep the fruit, and so it is being lost.

"For example, the citrus harvest in the coffee-growing zone which goes to Ecuador has not been able to be transported, and the losses have been in the millions. We have around 20,000 hectares of citrus fruit that have not been able to be traded, and this fruit is practically completely lost.

Banana Growers Association of Colombia (Augura) president Juan Camilo Restrepo emphasized there had not been any impacts on banana exporters in the Urabá department, and all contracts had been met, but the situation was still worrying.

"The effects of the strike, going beyond bananas, have repercussions of a social and economic character in the region of Urabá, and we hope the truck drivers in the region reach a good agreement with the national government so that we can continue to be a region that transmits prosperity and economic development," Restrepo said.

Carlos Lozano of the Colombian Uchuva Committee, which represents the export industry for the exotic fruit also known as the goldenberry, physalis and aguaymanto, told www.freshfruitportal.com the strike had affected growers but the degree of losses was not yet known.

"Logistics have damaged production because one of the places where the strike has taken place is in the department of Boyacá, and there are various crops there," Lozano said.

"Many exporters source from Boyacá, so not having the mobility for fruit with calm and in the expected time, we have felt they effect.

"We will know better when we see the figures from the month that just finished and from the month of July, in terms of how we're going with exports."

So what can physalis growers do to overcome this situation?

"The uchuva fruit has the great advantage that firstly, the fruit is not so perishable. Because of the cape it has, it has a very good shelf life; the fruit is one we could perfectly say that after harvesting, even if you don't have a cold chain, it can last for three weeks without

problems," Lozano replied.

"And this means that if you have a problem you could leave it on the plant but sometimes what's ideal is to harvest it on time, have it ready, and as it's not so perishable and the companies run good cold storage systems, there won't be so many inconveniences."

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