

The California cherry campaign is due to kick off in the last week of April, and the industry is confident there will be promotable volumes of high quality fruit.



Indications are also for a relatively light crop in the state's southern growing district, but heavier volumes in the central and northern production areas.

Speaking with *Fresh Fruit Portal*, Morada Produce sales and marketing director Mike Jameson said conservative estimates were pegging the total cherry crop at around 8.5 million 18-pound boxes.

"This year looks like a really good crop," he said.

"It seems like we've got good volume throughout the state. The earliest district of Bakersfield is probably the lightest crop, but as we move into the middle district of Fresno and Hanford the crop seems to be much better, and then when we get into the Bing district of Stockton, Lodi, Linden we seem to have a very good crop."

He anticipated the harvest of early varieties to begin around April 25-28, with volumes of the Brooks variety peaking during the middle couple of weeks of May, followed by the Bing peak in late May and early June.

The timing is around 10 days later than the previous campaign as a result of the cool spring, but this marks a return to more typical dates for the industry.

Jameson believed there may be a "slight gap" before the start of the Northwest cherry deal,

which an industry head said was [running significantly later than last year.](#)

As usual with one of California's first summer fruit crops, the representative was expecting to enter into a strong domestic market.

"I think that the demand for the domestic market is very good. There's a lot of interest and a lot of excitement," he said.

"California cherries kick off the summer fruit program so there's a lot of excitement from retailers throughout all of the U.S."

In addition, he pointed out the heavy rainfall received over the winter has greatly benefited the state's stressed trees by saturating the root systems.

"We're expecting good fruit size, a clean crop, and everything comes down to Mother Nature from this point on."

### **U.S. retailers competing more with Asia for early volumes**

Grower Direct Marketing sales manager Mark Cotton agreed the crop looked to be lighter further south in California, but highlighted there would be "a very good crop of promotable volume."

"All factors indicate right now that we should have a good quality year, quality that chain stores are going to want to promote with," he said.

Cotton expected the season to wrap up around June 10.

He also anticipated a buoyant domestic market, noting demand from U.S. retailers for the early varieties especially had been increasing over recent years.

"California cherries are the first new fruit of the summer and there's always a lot of demand early on to get early cherries for retail," he said.

"Before all the demand usually came from Asia, but U.S. retail over the last five years has really come on and has been competing with the Asian markets to get these early cherries."

### **Optimism for disruption-free season**

Meanwhile, Oppy representative Jon Bailey said California as a whole seemed to be "looking

at a good crop, but not a huge crop."

"We may get started around April 22, but the peak of the season will start around May 6 or 7 and pretty go pretty much through all of May, and finish up in June 6 or 8," he said.

Northwest volumes would likely not pick up until at least a week after that, Bailey added.

He also commented that so far the weather had been "pretty beneficial" for the cherry crop, and was optimistic for a strong market and a campaign free from disruptions.

"The Californian cherry deal has been really disrupted with weather over the last two or three years, and so retailers and shippers are always nervous about any more weather events, but I think everyone's pretty excited this year," he said.

"I think demand will be very good and it should be a strong deal. We should have a very strong, manageable-size crop with steady volumes, so the only potential disruptive issue is the weather."

Last year the state had forecast total volumes in excess of nine million boxes, but a series of rainfall-related issues slashed the number to a little more than five million.

A representative for Stemilt said growing conditions for Californian cherries had been "great, with ample moisture this winter than led to great conditions for trees to break from dormancy and bloom."

"We will have more cherries than last year, with a later start date than 2016's record early start date, but still ahead of 'normal' for CA cherries," communications manager Brianna Shales said.

"At this point in time, we expect to start harvest in late April, with volume ramping up in May. The main three weeks for loading CA cherries will be May 9 - June 1, and we do anticipate some overlap between the California and Washington crop.

"Market expectations are high for California cherries, and we expect a highly promotable crop with large sizes and great fruit quality."

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