

Good conditions have meant volume forecasts will likely be lifted tomorrow, while the sector is also out to make the most of the Australian market opening.

The head of an organization representing Mexican table grape growers expects a smooth transition in markets as Chilean supply winds down, but promotions will be necessary to move greater volumes this campaign.

Speaking with *Fresh Fruit Portal*, Sonora Spring Grapes director Juan Alberto Laborin said the volume rise would be between 10-20% depending on the variety.

"When the weather is good the fruit grows a little bit more; they could be some millimeters more [in size]," he said.

"That changes our forecasts."

Three weeks ago the association forecast 17.9 million boxes (up on last year's 16.8 million boxes), but that figure is now under reevaluation.



Photo courtesy of Campos Borquez

"On Thursday we'll have our forecast we estimate it could be 1-1.5 million more boxes...very probably it will be 19 million boxes or more in exports," he said.

"The quality is good. The date for the first box of the season will be very similar to last year, between April 27-29.

"Cold hours were a bit below normal but thanks to God the sprouting was very good with abundant bunches - there will be enough volume to promote and we are ready to promote with material that we know will move the volume well," he said, adding the highest volumes would go from May through June."

To use last year's season as a gauge on cultivars, the executive highlighted Flame Seedless led the pack with 9.2 million boxes, followed by Sugraone (3 million), early green grapes (2.5 million), Black Seedless (583,000), Red Globes (517,000) and other new varieties (298,000).

"The early greens will have the highest growth, as we have some varieties like Early [Sweet] and Prime which will move a lot because they are new plantings. They are from farms that had their first harvests last year.

"Always in this region we look for varieties and try to go as early as possible to get a wider window."

One grower who exemplifies this trend is Pablo Borquez of Campos Borquez, a company based in the northern Sonoran town of Caborca that has expanded into the state's south to grow grapes earlier.

"We are in Ciudad Obregon which is a new area that we're opening up. We think we'll be starting on May 8. There's also Guaymas which starts to pack a bit and is a bit earlier than us at the end of April or the first days of May," Borquez said.

"In Ciudad Obregon we have a big plantation of white grapes, principally with the new varieties. It's thanks to those varieties that we've been able to open this region and go earlier, widening the window for our supply from the start of the season.

"The majority of the new production is just starting now this year, from 30 hectares, but we have almost 200 hectares that will enter production the following year."

He also highlighted the Early Sweet variety, a product of the Arra program, which he claimed had a better quality and flavor than the similarly early Perlette cultivar and could also tolerate more difficult climates.

"And we have other varieties from different programs as well...the Arra program is excellent; some of their varieties are very propitious for the early growing area of Mexico. For me it's one of the best programs, not just because we're in it," he said.

Like Laborin, Borquez also highlighted this year's very good quality production, mostly due to "very appropriate" weather conditions which have led to a greater number of bunches on vines and better quality production in general.

"The conditions are there for one of the best years, not just the growers but also for the customers and consumers to make the most of," he said.

California-based company Sun World - which has its varietal brands like Midnight Beauty, Autumn Crisp, Adora Seedless and Sable Seedless - also continues to expand its proprietary program in the regions that follow the Chilean deal - northern Mexico and California's

Coachella Valley.

Sun World sales manager Jason Fuller concurred with Laborin that many felt the current Sonora table grape estimate of 17.9 million was too low.

"Weather will obviously create be the driver of how much of the fruit gets harvested. 2017 will see more volume of newer varieties, mainly in the green grapes. There will be some red, but less variance there with the overwhelming majority being Flames," he said.

"There are some grapes crossing now but with very little volume. This will increase in the coming years, but the newer plantings are still limited.

"The fruit sets look good at this point, which should give retailers optimum volumes to promote grapes from May 15 through the month of June."

From Coachella, Fuller expects volumes will remain steady from last year but could possibly be down slightly.

"The early fruit is later than expected, starting in the second week of May in a very long way. The June harvest timeframe looks strong and is expected to have promotable volumes," he said.

"There are an increasing number of the newer varieties," he added.

Coachella grower Steve Root, president of East West Unlimited, said quality in his valley was also looking excellent this year.

"We've got a good Flame crop - we'll probably start around May 1...we'll have pretty good supplies around the middle of May," he said, adding the green grapes would start a week after the Flames.

He said the weather was good for growing as well, with highs between 90-105°F in the days to come.

"Our greens are a little lighter on the early side, and they're looking pretty heavy on the late end of the deal," he said.

"The Flames look like they've got plenty of grapes and it's the same with the colored grapes, there seems to be plenty of them."

He expected good prices for the fruit in 2017, and also urged the industry and consumers to support local produce.

"You gotta support Trump - buy American, hire American, keep America strong," he said.

Mexican table grape exports - Australia in the industry's sights

Laborin said around 70% of Sonora's table grapes were exported to the U.S., followed by the Mexican domestic market (12%) and Canada (10%). The remaining 8% is spread across a wide range of continents.

"We are in important countries like England, in the case of Asia we're in China, Hong Kong, India, Singapore, Vietnam, Bangladesh, the Philippines," he said.

"We go to the Chinese mainland directly, to Beijing and Guangzhou. We have a phytosanitary protocol signed with them."

He highlighted growth opportunities in other European countries like the Netherlands, Finland and the Czech Republic, but the newest market for the association is Australasia.

"It's definitely very good news that the Australian market has opened," he said.

"We are entering the Australian market for the first time - last year and the year before we have entered the New Zealand market with good results.

"We have some very good clients there ready to receive our product, and we're very happy to be able to start this adventure with Australia; we consider it a very good market and we are ready to send them very good quality in good time, and of course that all our fruit meets the quality, health, social responsibility and environmental standards, everything that's required for being in any market worldwide."

He estimated the first fruit would be sent to Australia starting May 10.

"All the varieties are attractive for Australia , especially the seedless varieties which represent 95% of our grapes, including green, red and black. They have a lot of potential there.

"It depends on what Australia requires of the product - we are ready to send by plane or by ship."

Headline photo: Early Flame variety, courtesy of Grapa

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