

Mexican table grape exports to the U.S. have got off to a sluggish start this year, but with the industry in the Latin American country forecasting a record crop, June looks set to be an exceptionally high volume month.

As of May 13, only around 289,000 boxes had crossed into the U.S.

This figure is little more than 1% of the 22 million boxed forecast this year and a third of the amount shipped by the same date last year, which had a much smaller crop.

According to Sonoran Table Grape Growers Association (AALPUM) president Juan Laborin, only around 4 million boxes will have been harvested by the end of May.

But he anticipates exports will soar in June, with three weeks of 750,000 boxes per day.

"Nogales could see its first 5 million-box grape week ever," he said.

By contrast, Mexican exports in 2017 - which saw similar volumes to those forecast this year - totaled 9.5 million boxes in May that year, more than double what is expected for the same month this year.

John Pandol, special projects director of California-based table grape company Pandol Bros said it was important for the industry to be prepared for the upcoming surge of fruit.

"We are preparing to handle one of the most concentrated harvests ever. For both sales and operations, we'll be sleeping with our combat boots on," he said.

"As a marketing and sales issue, the size of the crop is not as much of a challenge as the rate of harvest."

He added that cold chain capacity is up to the task, with numerous new cold storage facilities having been built in Nogales and growing regions over the last few years.

Mexican table grapes - mainly from Sonora, but also some smaller volumes from Jalisco - are coming into a hungry market.

Pandol said that although there were still some Chilean grapes available - mainly the late-season Crimson seedless - white seedless volumes are virtually nonexistent and supplies in general are low across the board.

"Certainly, there's a gap in the market. It's undersupplied, and most people expected there

to be a few more grapes around. Chile is present but not as robustly as we had assumed and in the past, and Mexico, of course, is late," Pandol said. "Volumes are limited and prices are very high."

Chileans grapes throughout the season have also been of a better condition in general this year compared to last year, with not nearly as much repacking taking place and improved performance at retail, he said.

As for California grapes, Pandol said that the Coachella Valley will likely pack around 4 or 5 million boxes in June, with the San Joaquin Valley to get underway in July and another high volume crop expected.