

The Peruvian blueberry industry is expecting a huge 40% year-on-year rise in exports this season to around 165,000 metric tons (MT), according to an industry body.

The South American country overtook Chile last season to become the world's largest exporter of fresh blueberries, sending 120,000MT to overseas markets.

Luis Miguel Vegas of the Peruvian blueberry association ProArandanos said that peak volumes were forecast for week 41, when a little over 10,000MT of fruit is expected to be shipped.

Vegas said that the Asian market is set to receive the biggest increase in percentage terms, with exports to the region due to double year-on-year.

Meanwhile, exports to Europe are expected to increase by 50%, and to the U.S. by 25%.

"Currently around half of the volume is sent to the U.S. market, 30% to Europe, 15% to Asia and the remaining 5% to other countries in South America, as well as the Middle East and the Caribbean," he said.

"However, this campaign we see Asia's share becoming very substantial", he said, adding that Peru should be able to export to Taiwan for the first time this coming season, having gained market access in March.

Vegas explained that Peruvian blueberry operations have been able to continue without difficulties over recent months despite the pandemic, thanks to the industry's efforts and due to having lots of time to prepare.

"The companies have had to get up to speed to comply with all the regulations to protect the health of workers... In May we were well prepared for the start of the export season which officially began in week 20, with shipments to Brazil and Thailand," he said.

However, he added that the shortage of labor - a problem for the Peruvian blueberry industry even before the pandemic - continues to be a challenge.

"It's always an issue for growers, because blueberries are a very labor-intensive fruit. In light of the pandemic, evidently we're going to need more people, and so finding them and transporting them to the fields is a big challenge," he said.

Peruvian blueberry industry growth

Vegas explained that the Peruvian blueberry industry has grown explosively over the last decade.

"A decade ago people didn't think it was possible to grow blueberries in Peru, and now it's the world's leading exporter," he said.

He added that markets are becoming more demanding and consumers more sophisticated.

"In addition, there's more competition. Not only is production growing in Peru, but also in other countries like Mexico and South Africa. So it's very important that in line with the growth we continue to improve the product to satisfy different markets," he said.

While Biloxi remains the predominant variety in the Peruvian blueberry industry, Vegas said that over recent season new genetics have been introduced.

At the end of 2019, there were around 11,000 hectares of blueberries planted in Peru. This figure is expected to grow to 13,000 by the end of this year, and potentially 15,000 in two years, depending on market conditions and the level of investment by companies.