

The young Colombian blueberry industry has received a major boost by way of the trade association being approved to market fruit on growers' behalf.

Asocolblue, the Colombian Association of Blueberries, informed FreshFruitPortal.com that the marketer was approved last year, a decision that has been a milestone for the blueberry industry.

According to Gabriel Botero, the commercial unit manager of the association, the marketer was a much-needed project for the country's producers.

He explained: "Growers performed the labor of planting, fertilizing, caring for the plants, and finally coming out with the fruit, but they were thwarted by the commercial aspect. They did not have the experience, they did not have the contacts, and sometimes they did not have the means to reach large areas"

He stated that some Colombian blueberry association members contributed with resources that allowed commercial operations to begin this year. This initiative has had the benefit of bettering blueberry sales prices and somewhat standardizing activity.

"We finally started with the support of retail chains interested in working with associations and in what they see as an opportunity to skip middlemen," he said.

Boltero also commented that they began operations in a small site, measuring 24 square meters (258 square feet), and in less than three months had to relocate to a new location of 300 square meters (3,229 square feet).

He then added that it is there that they are gathering fruit and making sales on a national level to different clients and retailers. The aforementioned is in conjunction with the sales that some associates make abroad.

"We have been growing. We have been delivering more and more fruit. We are now looking to automate operations and we will start with a test exercise in packing, of receiving the fruit in bulk and packing it," he said.

The idea of the association beginning to pack blueberries on its own accord has been a process of learning and studying, commented Botero.

The purpose of this was to be able to be increasingly autonomous within the association and not have to depend on third-party operations.

“We are doing the work manually [for now] but we are already starting to look for machinery to automate the process, become more efficient, be able to parameterize, standardize fruit quality,” he remarked.

“It has been very positive, very beneficial for everyone because it allows for all cultivators to come to the same side with the same direction and, in the short term, we have the option of having exportable fruit,”

Boltero further stated that the process has allowed them to better familiarize themselves with what is planted and analyze different ways to improve processes.

“We have high expectations for growth. And effectively we want to get there but with an advanced operation that we can manage”

### **Current operations**

While the Colombian blueberry volumes that are currently being moved are about 10 thousand weekly kilos on average, they plan to continue increasing operations medium term.

Boltero clarified that they are still studying the varieties which show the best performance in Colombia, experimenting and working with varietal development, something very new to them.

“We are learning and looking at our crops: how they are developing, what they yield, how long the fruit lasts, what life capacity they have and the quality of that life,” he explained.