

Colombia is on track to have a bright future in key international lime markets and will be able to offer greater flexibility to U.S. retailers and importers, according to an industry representative.

Oscar Baracaldo, COO of Farmfolio, the company that manages the new packhouse [La Dona Fruit](#) in Colombia, told FreshFruitPortal.com that he believes Colombian lime exports will continue to go mainly to the U.S. until a good amount of growers in a standardized program exists and the knowledge gap of understanding quality-control is closed.

Along with having a “wider range of uses for the produce”, the U.S. market is “more fixed” than the European market and has logistical advantages, making it easier to establish a presence, according to Baracaldo.

As the country is coming into production, the “opportunities here are becoming more clear [...] this is the right spot to grow citrus in Latin America,” said Baracaldo.

Colombia’s Andes region benefits from distinct microclimates at varied altitudes and will be able to fill gaps in global production from September to November, and from January to March.

Because Colombia has a tropical climate, that can mean quite a bit of rain, this year in particular. “People are saying it is the most it has rained in the last twenty years,” said Baracaldo.

“With Colombia, since there is a lot of water here we grow juicier limes. The norm for Mexico or Peruvian lime’s [juice content] is anywhere from 27 percent to 30 percent and in Colombia, you can see juice contents as high as 40 percent,” he said.

However, the rain “has recently complicated harvesting” as citrus grows quickly in Colombia, meaning difficulties keeping the fruits at a low maturity stage while still having large enough sizes to export a top-notch product.

The U.S. lime market is almost entirely supplied by Mexico. According to data from the International Trade Centre, the U.S. imported \$493 million worth of limes, of which \$480 million of that came from Mexico. Colombia is next with \$9 million.

“Colombia has key indicators to become an exporter of sizeable volume, of course, this will not happen overnight,” said Baracaldo.

“But if you look closely at the growth rate of the exports in the last three years in Colombia,

the ratio has been higher than any other country in Latin America.”

[The U.S. market] can find a lot more flexibility which should be refreshing,” he said, “for Colombia, everything is just new and people are welcoming it with open arms.”

Regarding competition within the U.S. market, Baracaldo said there are “a lot of price swings with Mexico” making the demand for new origins higher.

Colombia has a logistical advantage when it comes to exporting to the U.S. and Europe as it is just three to five days and 12 to 14 days away, respectively. In contrast, Peru’s exports to Europe may take up to 22 to 23 days.

That, along with having access to both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, is an advantage when shipping fresh produce.

Why focus on the U.S. market?

When it comes to fresh fruit, Europeans are “much more concerned with the quality of the product than in the U.S,” Baracaldo said.

“The [European] market is looking for different origins, as strong as Mexico and Brazil are [in the industry], there are some windows where retail programs are looking to fill and [Colombia] can fill those windows,” he said.

As Colombia’s lime industry continues to grow and standardize processes, it looks to establish a presence in the U.S. with more fixed programs than other markets.

“Having fixed programs allow for flexibility that is much needed in the business at this time”, Baracaldo said.

Though the competition in the U.S. market is high, La Dona Fruit, a packhouse in Colombia, is small enough to fly under the radar.

“We are a good size, but we are tiny for what the demand is, so I wouldn’t say there is a competition per se with other origins, I would attribute [the search for new origins] to market conditions.”

La Dona Fruit recently opened a new packhouse in Colombia and began exporting about two-thirds of its Tahitian limes to the U.S. market.

“Comparatively, right now it isn’t the same volume [of limes], though it’s getting there and we are going to see great things from Colombia in the next two to five years,” he said.

Baracaldo believes that Europe will be the endgame for the Colombian lime industry.

“Based on our data, we expect a growth nearing 120% in the next 2 years as a large portion of farms come into the production stages,” Baracaldo said.