

The total volume of table grapes traded in the 2020-21 season is expected to hit a record 3.4 million metric tons (MT) despite "multiple hurdles", according to a USDA report.

At the world level, the pandemic doesn't appear to have limited output as losses by some producer countries are being offset by gains in others, keeping production at 24.7 million MT, just below the record level set in 2017-18, the report said.

In addition, if forecasts are realized, this year could also mark the first time Peru surpasses Chile in production, it said.

"Global trade has faced many challenges this past year due to COVID-19 and its many effects. Agriculture as a whole has had to overcome, and continues to be confronted with, significant transportation challenges as part of the fallout from COVID-19," the USDA Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS) report on World Markets and Trade said.

"Included in these are worldwide shipping delays and container shortages, with resultant high shipping costs, while countries also face labor shortages to varying degrees due to COVID-19 measures.

"Table grapes experienced further obstacles the latter half of the season that made the year even more trying."

The report noted that in Peru, striking workers blocked roads and shipments in Ica in December, hitting growers in the top producing region during the Andean country's second-largest export month.

Additionally, in the midst of Chile's harvest in January, unseasonal and torrential rain caused severe damage in three of the main growing regions, it said. Producer associations in O'Higgins, the largest producing region, reported losses of up to 80 percent.

And in March, the cargo ship Ever Given ran aground and blocked the Suez Canal, impacting India's exports destined for Europe at the peak of its shipping season.

But the report noted that there is also "no relief expected from lower volumes", with production levels remaining high.

"Adequate supplies are often being met with logistical challenges in getting fruit to import markets, but most major exporters have been able to reach markets, with some even expanding their reach to new destinations. Chile, the United States, and Mexico are the only top producer-exporters anticipated to see reduced shipments, but mostly due to lower

supplies," it said.

"Despite the litany of challenges, the table grape industry has shown great resilience. With steady high volumes, imports and exports are each projected to reach a record of more than 3.4 million tons."