

New Zealand apple and pear exporter JR's Orchards expects an increase in exports and based on pre-season conditions believes that the prospects are positive, despite the labor and logistical issues affecting the industry.

The company's operations director Jamiee Burns said in a statement that the company expects to export 25% more than its last "solid" season, 2020. That would bring its total to some 255,000 cartons of apples. The company also expects to deliver 10,00 cartons of Pears, between March and May 2022.

[The company](#) works with four pear and six apple varieties, exporting mainly to Asia, Europe and the Middle East. Pears started picking at the end of February, and the first Royal Galas were harvested in the beginning of March.

"Apple size is up by two counts on all varieties due to near-perfect conditions. We had a mild spring and warm summer. Although we have irrigation, we haven't used it because natural rainfall has boosted fruit size and quality. After going into the past two seasons off the back of a drought, this is a pleasant change," Burns said.

She said JR's forecast was slightly ahead of NZ Apples and Pears' predictions of an industry-wide increase of 17 per cent on the 2020 season.

"In 2021, we had the fruit but only 17 workers (of 70 required) to pick it. We exported 175,000 cartons of apples and the entire industry was down by 25 per cent. This year, we're back to full strength with seasonal workers under the Recognized Seasonal Employers (RSE) Scheme, we've grown our markets and are looking forward to an excellent season,"

She said 35 per cent of fruit was exported to Europe, 30 per cent to the United Kingdom, 25 per cent to Asia. The remainder went to the Middle East and its developing market in India which is now surging back after a long COVID lockdown.

However, while forward-planning had equipped JR's Orchards to grow its markets despite two years of global disruption, the Russian-Ukraine conflict presented a significant new challenge for exporters, she said.

"With Russia shut, fruit and vegetables from around the world are landing in Rotterdam. This will cause major disruption to supply lines and drive prices down - and that's before fruit from the Northern Hemisphere arrives. Our fruit is currently at sea and due to land in the next few weeks. We'll be working to expand our customer base into Asia and focusing on Vietnam, Thailand and Malaysia until the situation improves.

“We can produce the best crop with excellent fruit size, but we can’t control the global market. Another pressure for New Zealand exporters is the horrendous cost of shipping. Container space is tight and the cost is nearly double what it was last year, which will be a barrier for some,” she added.

JR’s Orchards is the only grower and exporter in the Wellington region. In 2023, it will harvest its first Lady in Red apples – a high color Cripps Pink cultivar marketed as Pink Lady apples. The pandemic had also forced the business to bring forward research into new packhouse technologies such as robotics, she said.