

Major producers and exporters across Mexico are investing in water and energy efficiency systems, and seeking to eliminate wastage, in an effort to address many of the environmental challenges that could have an impact across the country's supply chain.

Speaking at the recent IFPA Mexico Conference, which took place in Guadalajara from June 22-23, exporters told *Fresh Fruit Portal* that sustainability was now central to their business strategies moving forward, as they seek to address both long-standing and emerging problems.

Cristabel Meza, senior environmental manager at tomato producer NatureSweet, said water conservation and renewable energy was now high on the company's agenda at its Jalisco, Colima and Nayarit sites.

"As hydroponic producers, water conservation should be simple, but we have a technological challenge in terms of profitability because water is subsidised in Mexico," she said. "Because water effectively costs nothing for the agricultural sector, there is a lot of waste across the industry."

Although none of NatureSweet's Mexican sites currently lack access to water, Meza said the company - which draws its water from wells - was planning for potential drought in the long term by taking preventative measures, principally by investing in energy efficiency.

"In terms of water use, we are looking at the long-term impact drought could have on our business and we are reinstalling tubes for recirculating water which were suspended because of the Rugose fruit virus that affected tomato production between 2018-19," she explained.

"Within that, we are using ultraviolet systems for disinfection. We are also analysing the design of the greenhouses to identify which are the most efficient in water usage."

As with water, energy for agriculture receives significant subsidies from the Mexican government, which means there has been little incentive for growers to invest in renewable energy sources. However, Meza said NatureSweet was planning to install solar panels in remote production sites where the energy supply is often at risk and maintenance unreliable.

"We are planning to install solar panels to reduce this risk, but at the same time making sure we keep within the five megawatts that are permitted without having to obtain more government-level permissions," she revealed.

Fortune Growers, the Chicago-based importer, has been growing in Mexico for over 16 years, first through associated growers and now via its own production. This production is sourced from its flagship ranch in Dolores Hidalgo, Guanajuato, as well as from sites in Puebla, Tlaxcala, Veracruz, Aguascalientes, Zacatecas, Hidalgo, Tamaulipas.

Although it only started with 1 million cartons of broccoli 10 years ago, Fortune is now the number one exporter of fresh broccoli to the U.S., producing 4 million cartons each year, as well as carrots, lettuce, cabbage and celery.

“When we started in Mexico as distributors, we looked at those products that were starting to have supply problems in the U.S., principally because of problems in California with access to water and seasonal workers,” explained the company’s Giovanna Paola Barbosa. “Producing in Mexico allows us to grow broccoli in significant volumes.”

However, with the aim of achieving a more precise, predictive and regenerative business, Barbosa said Fortune was aiming to create an “eco-system” that ensured none of its production went to waste.

“We are conscious that we don’t just export broccoli, we also export water, so our usage of water is controlled because we want to be responsible,” she said.

“We want to use 100% of the water we take, and we are working with the government to put in place efficient water storage systems that also help improve productivity. It’s a focus on recuperating everything that is invested and reinvesting those same resources once again.”

Fortune’s second sustainable goal, she continued, was to achieve greater efficiencies in production. “We have planted 65,000 broccoli plants in our fields and the aim is to use 100% of those plants, so we have started to open markets for broccoli leaves and broccoli stalks for making vegetable-based rice which is similar to cauliflower rice.

“If we don’t make these changes, we’re not going to be able to continue producing,” Barbosa added.