

The 2022 California table grape season is off to a solid start with similar volumes to 2021 expected, but high costs, the ongoing shipping crisis and the added challenge of inflation remain a cause for concern.

Industry experts told The Grape Reporter about their expectations for the 2022 California grape season.

Forecast

President of the [California Table Grape Commission](#) Kathleen Nave said that current estimates for crop size this year stand at 95 million 19 pounds boxes, similar to last season's volume of 95.2 million 19 pound boxes.

Although there was a frost in April and a colder spring than usual this year, Elena Aguaron, who is Commercial Manager for the Americas at [International Fruit Genetics \(IFG\)](#), insisted that volumes would not be heavily affected.

John Pandol, Director of Special Projects at [Pandol Brothers Inc.](#), agreed, saying that the impact of the loss caused by the frost in April had "already been accounted for in the estimates" and added that there were no indications of other problems with the crops, as "first varieties coming out have normal size".

Therefore, "growing conditions [are] conducive for high-quality, consistent sizing and very favorable grapes," as stated by Marc Serpa, [Oppy's](#) Director of Domestic Grapes and Sales Manager.

Start of the season

Although some [questions were raised about the transition](#) between the Mexican and Californian table grape seasons, Aguaron commented on how "the Mexican season ended with a shorter volume than initially forecasted" which culminated in a good transition overall.

John Pandol explained that harvest is "about normal", having started in week 18 in the Coachella valley and in week 26 in the San Joaquin Valley.

And for growers, the season started a little earlier than usual, with Oppy's California crop being about a week ahead of last season and IFG seeing an earlier start (3-5 days) in the San Joaquin valley.

Market conditions

The general expectation is for prices to be better in 2022 than in 2021, which, according to Kathleen Nave, has “already been seen in the first part of the season”.

However, production costs are high, having “taken a jump in 2022 over 2021”. Increasing costs, delays in shipping and inflation are all putting pressure on the California table grape industry.

“Port delays and high freight costs continue to be a challenge,” said Serpa, while Aguaron also mentioned delays in deliveries of products, such as fertilizer and increased fuel and material costs being a problem.

In addition, Pandol admitted that for the 2022 season, “the real unknown factor is how inflation will affect consumption.”

On one hand, inflation could be beneficial to the table grape industry as people tend to dine out less and buy more at supermarkets.

On the other hand, grapes are a more expensive fruit and “half of grape consumption [is] in the top 25% income wise”, so inflation could benefit cheaper fruits like bananas and watermelons more, Pandol suggested.

Moreover, prices went up less than inflation last year and history appears to be repeating itself this year, with wholesale price inflation and retail price inflation in the U.S. standing at approximately 11 percent and 9 percent respectively.

Therefore, “prices are up and margins are down” stated Pandol, concluding that “we need to raise the prices more than just the inflation of this year.”

Nave echoed this sentiment: “Prices have to be higher.”

Exports

For 2022, the President of the California Table Grape Commission expects exports to “continue to be a challenge” because of global shipping issues. However, some changes in the California table grape export promotion program have been made to compensate for this, she explained.

Firstly, a “continued use of air shots” can be expected for the 2022 season. Although air

freight is more expensive, allowing for less volume to be sent, it is more reliable than shipping.

Additionally, there will be more promotion in the domestic market, as well as in more local export markets like Canada, Mexico and Central America, which are easier to access.

Furthermore, there will be a focus on high volume months in these export markets, said Nave.

Although supply chain issues have sparked heavier promotion in the U.S. over the last couple of years, Nave assured that “there will always be a need for exports in the off season”, because consumers, especially in affluent countries, are accustomed to table grapes being available year-round.

At IFG, export markets are also being maintained, although “at a lower percent” than in the past, Aguaron emphasized.

Nevertheless, Nave concluded: “Whether the demand will be as robust is an open question”.