

Australian stone fruit production is expected to grow by double digits across the board in the upcoming season, according to a USDA report.

Cherry production is forecast to increase by 19 percent, and peaches and nectarines are due to rise by 13 percent, while exports of these categories are expected to grow by 15 and 25 percent respectively.

The positive outlook for the 2022-23 season follows a challenging 2021-22 season that was impacted by a shortage of labor supply at harvest, export freight logistical challenges borne about by the Covid-19 pandemic, and wet weather at harvest, the report said.

"The export freight challenges are expected to continue to impact the forecast MY 2022/23 season and labor shortages are expected to continue, but to a lesser degree than the previous year," it said.

Increases in production, supported with an expectation of an improvement in labor availability for harvest, are anticipated to result in an increase in exports of cherries, as well as peaches and nectarines.

Despite the limited availability of air freight and escalation in costs, almost all of the cherries exported in MY 2021/22 were by air and this is expected to continue into the forecast year.

The overall forecast rise of peach and nectarine exports is mainly due to the anticipated production increase.

"If not for the continued labor availability and air and sea freight challenges, a larger rise in exports may be expected," the report said.

Nectarine exporters during the first year of Covid-19 had adjusted to the lack of air freight in 2020-21 via a focus on increasing sea freight from around 50 percent in the prior years to 75 percent.

"However, with a recovery in air routes, air freight of nectarines increased in volume to 39 percent in MY 2021/22 and is likely to continue to rise if air freight logistics improve during harvest," it said.

"For peaches, which are of lower value than cherries but also dependent upon air freight, export volumes in recent years have been less than half that of nectarines, and no significant improvement in their export volume is anticipated until there is an easing of air

freight costs."