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Cherry crop down, but California tree fruit volume picking up

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A February freeze and some cooler-than-normal spring temperatures have led to slower starts for several California fruit crops, but there will be promotable volume over the next several weeks, according to industry experts.

The most glaring crop decline as compared to last year is the California cherry volume. In 2017, growers sent 9.6 million cartons to market. That was 4.5 million more than the previous year and totally eclipsed the previous record year of 2008 when 8.7 million 18-pound cartons were



shipped. The 2018 California cherry crop is not expected to be even half the size of 2017, but promotable volume should still be available in late May. Photo courtesy of Stemilt Growers.

This year's carton count is not expected to reach half of last year's number and could be down in the 35-40 percent range. The stress of a huge crop last year clearly took its toll on cherry trees this year, and then there was the double whammy of bad weather during bloom and continued rain and cold in March and April.

The cold spring weather has created a slow start to the deal. "We started harvesting around May 1 but volume is very much reduced, especially compared to last year," said Brianna Shales, communications manager for Stemilt Growers LLC, which is based in Wenatchee, WA, but markets California cherries as well.

She said better days are ahead however, as the Coral variety is expected to produce its peak numbers during the May 14 and May 21 weeks and will be joined at the party by Bing cherries during the second of those two weeks. "We are heavy in the Coral variety but we expect Bings to peak from May 23 to about June 2."

The last two weeks of May and the first week of June will produce the vast majority of California cherries and will offer some promotional opportunities, albeit at higher prices than last year. Shales said the start of the Washington deal around June 10 should offer a smooth transition between California and Northwest cherry production. She added that the Northwest crop looks good but estimators were still working on volume predictions on this early May date.

Another California cherry producer — Morada Produce Co., based in Linden, CA — confirmed the steep decline in volume. Wendy Day, who is involved in operations with the grower-shipper, blamed the cold weather for reducing the 2017 crop by two-thirds. She agreed that the week of May 21 should bring peak supplies and some promotional opportunities.

California peaches and nectarines were also lagging behind 2017 numbers in early May, but both of those commodities, along with plums, are expected to have solid volume years.

“We are running seven to 10 days late on each of the varieties,” said Mark Grijalva of Mountain View Fruit Sales Inc., based in Reedley, CA. “We started off slow and we are going to see tight supplies for the first two to three weeks, but then we are going to have very good volume.”

He is telling his customers that the quality is good and the sizing is coming along. “We will have promotable volume — and lots of it — by early June on the peaches and nectarines.”

He added that the plum varieties are equally late with promotable volume expected by the end of June and into the first week of July.

Grijalva blamed very cold temperatures in late February, including a frost, for causing the delay in the start for the early varieties of the stone fruits. He said apricots have taken a hit along with cherries, peaches and nectarines. Grijalva was still bullish on the prospects for 2018. He reasoned that once the fruit starts coming, supplies would be strong. He was buoyed by the temperatures in Reedley that day, which were expected to top 90 degrees... perfect May fruit growing weather.

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