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Volume drop of 10-15 percent limits fresh cranberries for holiday season

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A 10-15 percent drop in overall cranberry volume may translate to a very limited supply of fresh cranberries for the remainder of the holiday season. While the quality and the color of the fruit have both been good, the size has been smaller than normal, industry experts said.

"The particular variety called Early Black, which is one of the oldest varieties that we have -- some are in bogs that are over 100-plus years old -- didn't size up as well as they typically do, and because the size wasn't where it typically is, your production number is going to be down a bit," Stephen V. Lee IV, president of the American Cranberry Growers Association and a sixth-generation grower at Lee Bros. Inc. in Chatsworth, NJ, told The Produce News. "We haven't gotten a whole lot of answers as to why there was a size difference, but consistently regardless of anything else, we all had an issue with the size of that particular variety."

As for volumes, "As I understand it, Massachusetts and Wisconsin were down significantly, while New Jersey was about average if not a bit above average," Mr. Lee noted. "Shortage shouldn't be confused with size. The production numbers were good as a whole, but this variety in particular didn't size up as well as it typically does."

The decline in volume has reached across most of North America, David Farrimond, executive director of the Wareham, MA-based Cranberry Marketing Committee told The Produce News.

"It seems like the entire market is going to be down this year," Mr. Farrimond lamented. "The fruit this year was smaller, and of course if you get smaller berries, it takes more to make 100 pounds," the weight of a cranberry unit known as a barrel. "Typically, fresh fruit accounts for 4-6 percent of total crop, and the total crop is going to be down this year. We are looking at a 10-15 percent decrease in

the overall crop"

Massachusetts appears to have been hit the worst, with a combination of exceptionally dry conditions causing a potential shortfall of about 300,000 barrels overall from the commonwealth, Mr. Farrimond said.

"In the other growing areas, we are seeing a somewhat similar, but maybe not as dramatic, drop in production," he said. "Wisconsin is going to be down a little bit, but we are not sure how much. Early on in the season, [Wisconsin] had some storms that didn't seem to impact the growing season. But upon reflection at harvest time, it did. We haven't heard much at all from Washington state, but we know it is down in Oregon from earlier projections."

Mr. Farrimond noted that Quebec seems to have been hit hard as well. "We are getting reports out of Quebec that it is pretty bad up there and there might be a decline of about 40 percent over last year."

On Nov. 27, Mark Sherburne, general manager of produce for Ocean Spray Cranberries Inc., told The Produce News, "Drought and an exceptionally cold weather snap in August in the East hurt the growth of the cranberries in the prime growing time industrywide. You add all of that and our crop is down substantially in Massachusetts and Quebec."

Mr. Sherburne noted that while there was a major decline in its volume, the Lakeville-Middleboro, MA-based cooperative "still filled all of its customers' needs through Thanksgiving 100 percent," but unfortunately, Ocean Spray "will not have cranberries domestically for the Christmas holiday."

Mr. Farrimond said that the Cranberry Marketing Committee is advising consumers who are concerned about the fresh fruit supply that "if you can find it while it's out there, get at least a couple of bags and throw one in the freezer so you can have it for Christmas. It's best to buy up a quantity and freeze them and take them back out as you need them."

While last-minute supplies will be tight, retailers and wholesalers that planned ahead seemed to be having few concerns.

"Fortunately for us, we prepare properly, especially with cranberries," said Greg Veneziano, director of produce and floral for Bozzuto's Inc., a wholesale distributor that services numerous retail clients in the eastern United States. "The people that didn't put their orders in properly I would guess are affected by it. We have Ocean Spray and we have zero issues because they request the orders early. In fact, we have already sold more cranberries this year than we have in the past."

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