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## **Volatility to mark western veg deal; celery market soars**

March 28, 2019

The f.o.b. price on celery has gone through the proverbial roof, and there is every reason to believe that demand will exceed supply for several more months.

“I’ve never seen a market as strong as this,” said Russell Widerburg, sales manager for Boskovich Farms Inc., based Oxnard, CA. “It’s extraordinary. There’s no other way to say it. In my 29 years I’ve seen nothing like it.”

He said that not only is the market red hot, but the rising price does not seem to have put a dent in



demand, “I’m not sure how to explain it.”

Russell Widerburg

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Steve Adlesh, director of sales and marketing for Beachside Farms, based in Guadalupe, CA, said the juicing market is driving celery sales. He said celery has become a favorite ingredient for both the home juicer and the processing juice industry, adding that the number of high-end fresh juices sold in refrigerated cases at the grocery store have exploded in recent years.

Widerburg was not ready to give all the credit to the juicing trend, but agreed it gains favor when celebrities come out and say they drink celery juice every day. He said fewer acres were planted this year and many celery fields in California currently have “seeder” issues, which means the plant is going to seed about halfway up the stalk, affecting yields.

“We saw in January that we were going to have a good market in the spring. Of course, no one predicted that it was going to reach \$65-\$70,” he said, noting that Boskovich’s price for all sizes was \$68.95 f.o.b. for conventional celery on March 26. Organic celery was a few dollars more per



carton. Mark McBride

The Oxnard district is typically the top supplier of celery from October to June. Santa Maria/Oceano kick in with their production in late spring and the transition to the Salinas Valley usually begins in June. “We should have a strong market until Salinas starts,” said Widerburg.

Veteran salesman Mark McBride of Coastline Family Farms concurred with the celery assessment from his Boskovich colleague. “I see no relief until the end of the Oxnard,” he said on March 26.

McBride also weighed in on the broad range of row crop vegetables transitioning from winter production in the deserts of Arizona and California to coastal production in California. Coastline harvested its first cauliflower fields on March 21 and broccoli production got under way during the last week of the month. He said cold weather has slowed the transition causing many grower-shippers to extend their Yuma production an extra week.

Because of all the January and February rain in California, planting schedules were interrupted and shippers are expecting a roller coaster ride through May. “The first couple of weeks (of April) look normal and then it all goes to hell,” McBride joked.

He said from about April 15 to the end of May, there will be gaps in supply of most crops as there were some January/February planting gaps that lasted a week or longer. “Some fields had standing water for 10 days,” he said.

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The fields that were planted in late December and early January before the rains will also be affected by nature's wintry output. McBride said even in the best fields, growers couldn't get in to do their normal cultural work, which could very well mean some quality issues and less yield per acre.

All of these factors add up to a volatile spring deal, especially for the crops such as iceberg lettuce and the cruciferous vegetables that have relatively long growing cycles in the 60-75 day range at this time of year.

Widerburg said cilantro, spinach and some of the other leaf items with growth cycles in the 30-45 day range would return to a normal production cycle much more quickly.

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