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## **North Bay enjoying strong apple season**

By

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January 21, 2021

Stars aligned over Michigan's fresh apple industry to have a great shipping season.

Ken Korson, sales and apple category manager for North Bay Produce Inc., cited many positive aspects of the deal.



Todd Freeland of North

Bay Produce.

Korson said apple sales have been very good this season for North Bay, as they have been for all Michigan shippers. “Everyone is in the same boat,” said. “Sales were very brisk this fall. Inventories are definitely a little lower than they were last year. Most of the Michigan shippers feel they’ll end a month earlier than normal in the spring, but they still plan to ship into late May or June. Last year we went until the end of June. So, that looks like about a month early at this point.”

Korson said that Michigan’s total fresh apple crop was down about 10 or 15 percent in 2020, compared to normal volumes. “It sounds like Washington and New York also have smaller crops. They’re definitely off a little,” he said.

The lower volumes have boosted prices.

A big factor favoring Michigan, Korson said, is that Washington shippers are facing very high freight rates. Michigan freight rates to the East Coast are oftentimes \$3 per box lower than what is paid from the West Coast.

Furthermore, “We are getting business in between that could go either way,” he said.

Yet another positive factor for Michigan apple grower-packer-shippers this year is that demand for bagged apples is way up because of COVID-19. This demand, of course, is driven by consumer perception that bulk apples may not be clean, as displays of tray-packed apples are likely touched by the hands of many other consumers.

Korson’s list of good things in Michigan extended with news that the color of Michigan apples this year was one of the best ever. Beyond that, “the quality is really good,” he said.

Michigan’s fruit sizes are down somewhat this season, which partly explains the reduced number of bins to be shipped. He said the volume is mostly down because of springtime frost damage.

North Bay, based in Traverse City, MI, is finding truck availability to be tight. “We have to pay more, and we have to work ahead,” said Korson. That was true this fall and should continue to be a challenge in early 2021.

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North Bay's truck price per-box to the East Coast was about \$3.50-\$4 in December. "A year ago, it was a dollar less."

North Bay's growers finished apple harvest in the third week of October. These growers participate in the H-2A labor program, which provided adequate harvest labor. Picking productivity was maximized by a sunny, cool fall, which not only added fruit color, but allowed workers to reach maximum productivity. Sometimes Michigan can face rain or even snow in the harvest season. That, of course, lowers productivity.

Korson said North Bay packinghouse labor is adequate, but there are setbacks because workers cautiously stay home if they don't feel well, out of concern for having or sharing Coronavirus.

"With COVID-19 you have to adapt," Korson said. "Foodservice is way down, but retail is strong, and you head in the direction that wants the fruit. If we have problems we solve them and move on. That's what we strive to do."

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