
- Advertisement -

Industry Viewpoint: How the pandemic has shaped the future of global fruit production

By

Pablo Gómez, IFG's international quality assurance manager for table grapes

January 14, 2022

Global fruit production has not only persevered in the face of a worldwide health crisis, but it has also continued to adapt in response to the evolving landscape. A fast-paced industry already familiar with navigating unpredictable conditions and forecasting market demand, the agricultural sector never slowed down, even in the worst times of the pandemic.



Pablo Gómez

However, that's not to say the journey was without any roadblocks: COVID-19 brought a wave of challenges with everything from labor to logistics. Yet, as consumer interest in fresh produce increased by more than 10 percent in 2020, fruit suppliers, scientists, horticulturists, and growers are overcoming these setbacks to usher in a new period of efficiency and innovation.

Weathering the storm of staffing and safety

Like countless other business sectors, fruit-focused agriculture struggled with staffing at the outset of the pandemic. While many companies turned to remote work options, the nature of agricultural operations needs employees to remain primarily in the fields.

The produce industry requires a significant amount of hand labor, particularly for table grapes and cherries. Managing thousands of employees who work simultaneous in-person shifts became an immediate area of focus. The main issue was the prevention of outbreaks in both the packhouse facilities and in the fields. Growers had to react quickly, forming small and segregated groups of workers adhering to organized schedules. In addition, the implementation of regular PCR tests enhanced other standard safety protocols that helped protect workers. While the actions were a costly investment, growers kept operations safe and healthy while maintaining productivity.

Nearly two years into the pandemic, though, staffing challenges persist. Due to new procedures and safety limitations, a scarcity of workers and higher costs still impact day-to-day operations worldwide. But while the problems are exacerbated given current conditions, this is nothing new for produce growers, especially in the United States where employment of agricultural workers is essentially at a standstill — it's expected to increase only 2 percent from 2020 to 2030, slower than the average for all occupations.

Navigating logistical burdens

The economic downturn has increased costs across the entire fruit supply chain, from growing and harvesting to delivering the product to market. As the pandemic continued into and throughout 2021, it became apparent that one of its most pronounced effects on the global fruit industry was on logistical operations.

The early days of lockdown restrictions and a slowdown in the production of goods created a ripple effect, sending refrigerated containers into a backlog of storage at cargo ports and inland depots. By

mid-2021, wait times to procure a container stretched anywhere from weeks to months depending on departure port and arrival destination.

The supply chain has faced a global shortage of containers projected to last into 2022, resulting in severe inflation in materials and transport costs. McKinsey & Co. reported it now costs up to six times more to ship a container from China to Europe than it did at the start of 2019.

A fresh take on the future of fruit production

Despite these challenges, the pandemic has shown how well prepared the agriculture industry is to adapt its systems in response to both adversity and increased demand.

The trend of healthy living and a desire for nutritious food that emerged over the last two years is a worldwide movement with evident staying power. The United Nations even designated 2021 as the International Year of Fruits and Vegetables. Manifested through behaviors such as at-home cooking and greater consciousness about food brought into the homes, the health and wellness trends have directly impacted the consumption of fruits and vegetables.

Fruit scientists, horticulturalists, and growers alike are looking to long-term solutions for meeting this need. For worldwide fruit-breeding company IFG, the answer could lie in a recent focus on breeding as much year-round fruit as possible as part of an overall quality and support strategy. IFG is known for inventing flavor-forward table grapes, including the Cotton Candy variety, which hold numerous health benefits in line with current consumer interests. By creating a 52-week table grape supply in partnership with growers worldwide, IFG aims to transform the fruit industry and contribute to a more sustainable production of premium table grapes and cherries.

In a sector where food and safety standards are already incredibly high, another key area that can influence growth and opportunity is leveraging technology to increase the simplicity and efficiency of production. The agritech tools that a reported 56 percent of U.S. farms have now adopted can help strengthen global fruit production with automation that eases the burden of labor shortages, conserves resources and mitigates crop losses.

As technology and scientific strategy rapidly advance, the industry is poised to thrive in a post-pandemic world. These professional improvements will affect every part of the supply chain, from the fields where the fruit is grown and harvested to the carts where consumers add their nature's bounty. Looking into 2022 and beyond, industry leaders will keep one eye on innovation while maintaining a stable production to ensure the world remains healthy and fed.

[Print](#)