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Industry Viewpoint: The key to produce buyers having fresh, quality products

By

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October 21, 2022

The droughts and heatwaves that hit the U.S. this summer received a lot of attention. Florida has been impacted by one of the most powerful storms to ever hit our shores. These weather patterns have far-reaching impacts on crops, including availability and quality.

Maintaining produce supply is key to keeping your distribution doors open and your costs controlled. With the changing climate, relying on one region for all your produce needs can wreak havoc on your supply and ultimately your ability to serve customers. Partnering with growers around the world is one way produce distributors can keep a stable inventory and meet buyers' demand.

Some key products impacted by weather this year included:

- **Bell peppers:** As one of the staples in the U.S., and with over 46 percent of consumers having purchased peppers within the past 12 months, keeping these stocked is critical. However, the U.S. Bell pepper acreage decreased from 62,080 acres in 2000 to 40,900 acres in 2015 — reducing production numbers of this popular product. In addition to less acreage to grow this product, California, Florida and Georgia are the highest producing states and have more recently been impacted by the extreme heat and weather patterns. Partnerships in western Canada have been critical to maintaining a steady, quality supply. Additionally, Spain and Holland have been strong sources for color peppers, helping to offset shortages in the U.S. With the disparity between supply and demand, these will likely continue to stay on short supply until production in Sinaloa, Mexico begins in January.
- **Tomatoes:** California has typically been responsible for roughly 25 percent of the world's output of tomatoes. According to the USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service, California's tomato processors reported contracts for 12.2 million tons of tomatoes for 2022, a 10 percent increase compared to last year. However, tomatoes need substantial water as they are developing. The drought in California severely impacted growers' ability to produce the quantity of tomatoes. On the flipside, the hurricane that hit Baja Mexico also impacted that region's availability. As a result, this fruit could continue to be in short supply through the fall as regions recuperate.
- **Lettuce:** One of the most popular vegetables in the U.S. is lettuce. With the shift toward veganism and vegetarianism, this market is expected to reach \$5.1 billion by 2026. California is responsible for producing a majority of the lettuce in the U.S. (70 percent), followed by Arizona (30 percent). Because of California's hotter-than-average temperatures and crop disease dating back to 2020, there has been a lettuce shortage and a resulting increase in price (up 67 percent from the previous year) due to low supplies.

Unfortunately, when crops are impacted one season, there can be a trickle effect to the next year. To

help stifle this, working with a variety of growers around the world can keep your commodity ripe.

Partnering with international growers

International growers can help offset supply demand when the U.S. is grappling with weather impacts. Having partners in various regions can keep produce quality and availability stable. Here are some considerations to keep in mind when selecting the right partner:

- **Seek out a reputable partner:** Various associations, like the International Fresh Produce Association can help connect produce wholesalers with reputable growers around the world.
- **Ask about their process:** From planting to cropping to shipping, find a partner that has established practices throughout the whole process. It is important that the cold chain is maintained to ensure quality at the time of arrival, especially when securing produce internationally.
- **Certifications:** When seeking out a grower, it is critical to look for one that is third-party certified. For example, the Equitable Food Initiative (EFI) is one of the most rigorous certifications in the industry. This addresses over 300 standards in the farming operation, including labor conditions, food safety and pest management. Similarly, GLOBAL G.A.P., which stands for good agriculture practices, is an established certification that underscores growers' commitment to adding value to their product, reducing reputation risks and gaining access to new and local markets. They also aim to improve their farm's process and management efficiency.
- **Start small and grow:** Knowing that growing cycles change and produce quality can be impacted each year, we recommend starting small with a grower. Start with one produce item, or a small quantity of a few items they produce. After they have demonstrated consistency and quality you can expand your volume with them to meet your needs.

Maintaining your supply is critical for your business's bottom line. While weather can be unpredictable, having a network of growers globally can help guarantee that you have access to quality produce.

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