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Slow-starting Sonoran grape deal about to pop

By

Tim Linden

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Cold weather in Mexico's Sonoran Desert has resulted in a very slow start for its fresh table grape deal, but supplies are expected to pick up significantly over the next several weeks.

"It's been incredibly cold all year," said Carlos Bon, vice president of sales for [Divine Flavor](#), headquartered in Nogales, AZ. "We knew it was going to be a late season, but we are continually guessing wrong every day."

He said the volume crossing the border on a daily basis has been extremely short leading to a high FOB price and a retail price more than double what it was a year ago. Bon said on the first day of June the volume of green grape varieties had started to pick up in the previous week but red grape varieties are still lagging far behind.

"Greens are starting to catch up but total shipments are still 20 percent below what they were a year ago," he said. "Reds just haven't picked up yet. Total shipments are 73 percent below last year's numbers. It's absolutely crazy."

The cold weather is delivering a double challenge for the grape bunches: the fruit is coming on much slower and the individual grapes smaller. Bon said growers look at bunch counts in the spring to estimate how many boxes will be shipped when the season starts to unfold. "It's been taking a lot more bunches to fill an 18-pound box than it usually does," he said. "For Flame Seedless, it usually takes 26 bunches per box, but this year it's close to 40 bunches per box."

This has led to an empty pipeline and unprecedented U.S. demand as the grapes cross into Nogales and are distributed throughout the country from there. But there is light at the end of the tunnel, according to the veteran of the Mexico grape industry. While the low temperature in the desert region on that morning was only 55 degrees, temperatures are expected to climb into the 90s over the first weekend of June.

Bon expects green grape volume to start to hit its stride by next week (June 5), but he doesn't think the red grapes will have typical volume until after June 15. Bon said that the good news is that the cold weather is good for grape quality. "We are seeing magnificent quality on all varieties except for the Flame Seedless," he said. "And we know the key to grape sales is good fruit. If you can get a customer to buy the grapes and then come back and buy them again, you can sell everything you have."

The preseason estimate was for Mexico to ship about 21.5 million cartons to the U.S. market this season. Bon doesn't believe the industry will hit that number, but he thinks it's possible to get close. "The quality is there and the bunch count is there," he said. "With the right partners, the right growers and the right pricing, we can move a lot of fruit. We could hit 20 million cartons."

He reasoned that about 3.5 million cartons crossed into the U.S. market in May. The pipeline is empty and he said it is doable to sell 16.5 million more cartons through June and well into July. Divine Flavor sources grapes from the most northern region of Sonora (Caborca) so Bon said the company will have grapes through the end of July but most shippers will not. He expects there will be a bit of a gap as grape production transitions from the spring deal in Mexico to the summer deal from California's San Joaquin Valley. Like Mexico, California has experienced cold spring weather and most of the summer fruit crops are running two to three weeks later than usual.

Photo: Divine Flavor packing its first Flames of the season.

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About Tim Linden |

Tim Linden grew up in a produce family as both his father and grandfather spent their business careers on the wholesale terminal markets in San Francisco and Los Angeles.

Tim graduated from San Diego State University in 1974 with a degree in journalism. Shortly thereafter he began his career at The Packer where he stayed for eight years, leaving in 1983 to join Western Growers as editor of its monthly magazine. In 1986, Tim launched Champ Publishing as an agricultural publishing specialty company.

Today he is a contract publisher for several trade associations and writes extensively on all aspects of the produce business. He began writing for The Produce News in 1997, and currently wears the title of Editor at Large.

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