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Western Fresh holding 70 percent of Chilean Asian pear import market this year

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On March 22, Chris Kragie, sales manager for Western Fresh Marketing in Madera, CA, told *The Produce News* that the company was currently importing Asian pears and kiwi from Chile.

“Asian pears started about two weeks ago and will run through late June or early July,” said Mr. Kragie. “Last year our Asian pear program represented 65 percent of what was imported into the U.S. This year, we will have 70 percent of that market. We are currently at 90 percent, but other importers will pick up a little steam as we move forward.”



Luis Carrasco, business partner, Chris Kragie, sales manager and Christian Calderon, grower-partner for Western Fresh Marketing. *(Photos courtesy of Western Fresh Marketing)* Western Fresh Marketing also has a major Chilean kiwi program. It is experiencing an increase of between 15 and 20 percent in imports this year over last year. Kiwi started in late March and will run to October.

“We have increased our early and late season Chilean kiwi programs, which we were lacking in the past few years,” said Mr. Kragie. “Our kiwi and Asian pear volumes have increased greatly in the past two years because we focused on mainstreaming and consolidating our growers so that they get a better return. And in return, they are more motivated to increase their production for us.”

He explained that at one time growers were starting to pull out of Asian pear and kiwi production because of the low returns they were getting. Western Fresh Marketing saw this as an opportunity to handle great products and at the same time help growers to make more money.

“Our first import season with kiwi, about five years ago, was about 100,000 boxes,” said Mr. Kragie. “Last year we moved 250,000, and this year we will move 300,000 boxes. We are programmed to move about 250,000 boxes of Asian pears in all varieties this year, compared to the 185,000 boxes that we handled last year.”

Western Fresh Marketing, founded in 1995, began by handling domestic product, but has evolved to become a major importer. Besides its headquarters in Madera, it has offices in Santiago, Chile, and Menominee, MI. It is currently opening a new office in Morrow Bay, CA.

Mr. Kragie said that the company is also enthusiastic about its Chilean quince program.

“We are one of the largest importers of this item,” said Mr. Kragie. “We deal in a lot of niche or exotic markets, and this is one. Our first containers of Chilean quince will start in early April and will run through June.”

The company also handles fresh figs from Chile in a program that runs from the first week of January to May. It has handled the product for two years. Mr. Kragie explained that the import protocol on figs requires treatment and so the item has a relatively short shelf life.

“We are one of only two fresh fig shippers in the U.S.,” he said. “We move over one million boxes of figs from California each year in a program that runs from mid-May to late December. Chile’s program helps us to fill in the gaps so that we can offer year-round supplies. This program is getting a lot of our focus, and we are diligently working with the FDA [U.S. Food and Drug Administration], the California Fig Advisory Board and others in an effort to create a systems’ approach program. We feel that the sky is the limit for fresh Chilean figs.”

Part of Western Fresh Marketing’s growth in its Asian pear and kiwi programs has been spurred by chain store support. Its plan is to keep growing its retail chain accounts.

“Between 80 and 90 percent of our business is with major chain stores,” said Mr. Kragie. “Our strength and growth strategy is to continue to sell direct to our retail customers in the U.S. and in Canada.”

He added that Chilean crops have not been affected by disease or insect pressures this year, but that “growers are dealing with some drought conditions,” he said. “Some growers are struggling somewhat, but our grower alliance has not experienced many problems. There are struggles ahead for everyone, however, unless they get some moisture soon.”

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