

Colombia Granted U.S. Access but Few Shipments Expected Through 2018

While Colombian avocados officially gained access to the U.S. market in mid-September of this year, experts are expecting very little fruit to be marketed in the States this year or next.

Juan Camilo Ruiz Perez is currently a Colombian avocado grower but was the founding executive director of CORPOHASS, a quasi government agency developed to represent the country's avocado industry in discussions with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. In an email exchange with *From the Grove*, Perez predicted that avocado shipments to the United States will be minimal both this year and next. "Someone has opined that it is possible that a very small amount is exported before the end of the year, which would be sent by air. I think it will take a year or a little longer because: 1) not many producers are in the quarantine pest monitoring program, 2) because the producers (who are in the program) are not all free of them, 3) you must show for a year that you no longer have pests in your groves and that during the last year there have been no pests."

In late August, he shared a PowerPoint presentation that he was scheduled to deliver in Mexico in early September about the scope of the Colombian avocado industry. One chart

revealed that Hass avocado acreage has doubled in the past half dozen years and now represents about 14,000 hectares (34,000 acres). Another slide noted that Colombia exported close to 40 million pounds of Hass avocados in 2016, with virtually all of it going to Europe.

U.S. importers agree that shipments will not be robust right off the bat. Jim Donovan, senior vice president of international operations for Mission Produce, did say that his firm had signed an agreement with Colombia's largest avocado exporter and some shipments could occur this year, though he agreed the total volume would be small.

He does believe that significant shipments over time are possible, but it will take time. And he said Colombia has already begun shipping to Europe so, like other South American countries, export production will not be limited to the United States. Both Peru and Chile ship the majority of their export avocados to Europe and one might expect Colombia to follow suit, especially considering that market is already being developed by Colombian exporters.

Emiliano Escobedo, executive director of the Hass Avocado Board (HAB), would not guess as to how quickly Colombian avocados will be shipped to the United States nor how large the crop will become. Like others,

he said it will take time to develop that country's Hass crop and export capabilities. But he also said it has factors that could make it a significant player in the long run. "Colombia has the resources readily available including land, labor, water and climate."

Gahl Crane, sales director for Eco Farms Avocados, Temecula, CA, echoed the sentiments of many in noting that increased volume is advantageous as U.S. demand has shown it can easily outdistance supplies. "This is great for North America. We have a need for additional supplies."

He added that volume from Colombia will most likely be very light initially as Eco is currently in discussions with some Colombian exporters and is hopeful it will be able to import at least some fruit next year. He said both packing houses and individual groves must be certified for shipments to the United States and that cannot happen overnight.

Escobedo also expressed interest in new supplies from Colombia. "At HAB we have a vision for Hass avocados to be the number one consumed fruit in the United States. To do that we need to double consumption and supplies. We need new supplies from all sources." 🥑