

## **U.S.: Rains help bring California blueberry volumes “back on track”**

Winter rainfall and new plantings are helping California’s blueberry production recover after a period of lower volumes resulting from the crippling drought, according to an industry representative.

California Blueberry Commission executive director Alexander Ott told Fresh Fruit Portal the season forecast was not due for a couple of weeks, but he anticipated a larger crop than last year.

“Last year we produced nearly 58 million pounds, and in years past we’ve been higher. Because of the drought, it kind of took its toll last year,” he said.

“But with the rain that we’ve received this year it seems to be that everything is back on track, so we’re hoping for a good blueberry crop this year.”

The Golden State has experienced one of its wettest winters in years, bringing much-needed relief to the prolonged drought conditions.

Ott highlighted the rainfall had boosted many growers’ water allocations this season.

“We have water allocations both from the feds as well as from state water projects. For the last couple of years folks have received 5-10% federal water allocation – or maybe even zero. Well, now they’re actually getting water,” he said.

“So whereas there were fields that were probably unproductive, probably less fallow, we’re starting to see folks plant this year. People are becoming a little bit more confident in the water supply than we were say last year or two years prior.

“Then in terms of where we had to cut back some of the water for some of the plants, we can now let it go a little bit longer to get the vigor that you’re looking for.”

In addition to the rainfall boosting volumes this year, Ott added that new plantings had been going in the ground rapidly over recent years. A report showed there were 7,257 acres planted in the state last year, compared to 5,895 acres in the 2013-14 season.

Some frosts in January and hail a couple of weeks ago may affect volumes slightly, but Ott said that generally weather-wise it was a case of “so far so good.”

The season is also running around five days later than the last campaign, which was significantly earlier than previous years, he said. The first growers in the state started harvesting last week, and Ott expects peak volumes to come in late May.

### **Exports to alleviate market pressure**

The U.S. market has been somewhat under pressure recently, in part due to large import volumes from South America, which the representative described as “a challenge that the industry as a whole has had for some time.”

He said there had been a “large influx of blueberries on the horizon” for a while, and the volumes were only going to increase. However, he said it remained to be seen how the market would turn out this season.

“We’re seeing a lot of good movement on export markets, so hopefully those export markets will be able to alleviate some of the high volume that’s going to be here on the domestic side,” he said.

“We’re also going to have to wait and see what the other states are doing as well. There’s been some heavy snow in the Northeast, and we’re still waiting to hear what is going on with Georgia and Florida, because that could definitely play into how California is going to work this year.

“So I think there are a lot of factors that are yet to be determined. But no doubt with a larger supply we’re going to have to find new ways to use blueberries, continue to generate demand, and also open up some of these export markets.”

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