

Spain: Earlier start of Huelva strawberry campaign due to weather conditions

Strawberry producers in the province of Huelva are concerned about the impact of the weather conditions after an autumn with little rainfall and very high temperatures. Climate change seems to be happening sooner than many had predicted and the sector worries about how varieties like the Fortuna, Primoris, Rociera, Rabida, Victory and San Andrea (the main varieties in the province of Huelva) will react to these changes.

Rafael Domínguez, manager of Freshuelva, stressed that "the planting stage of strawberries and raspberries will very soon come to an end in the whole province." Consequently, it is still early to predict how the lack of rainfall will affect the beginning of the season. In any case, "in order to develop adequately, the plant needs cooler temperatures, such as those that have already been recorded in recent days, but also the humidity that the rain brings." For this reason, he expressed his wish for a change in this trend, so that "the first strawberries can hit the markets at Christmas."

In any case, agriculture has always largely depended on the weather. The president of the Platform in Defence of Irrigation, Cristóbal Picón, says that "there is a positive side" to this atypical climate, characterised by sunny days, mild temperatures and total absence of clouds. According to the representative of the sector, these factors will allow for "an earlier start of the campaign," which may translate into a significant production of fruit in a period when prices are higher. The other side of the coin is that those with a lack of surface water for irrigation will have to stock up on the wells, which are already affected by the low rainfall.

Although Freshuelva has avoided giving official data on the acreage planted with strawberries until this stage is completed in the entire province, the heads of the main cooperatives agree that the figures will be similar to those of last year (5,460 hectares), perhaps with a slight and not very significant increase. The reason for this is that the number of hectares planted had dropped by 7% in the previous campaign. Despite this, the results were satisfactory, with a production totalling 302,500 tonnes and revenue up by 7%, namely thanks to a 10% increase in the average price, which made it possible to reach 454,665,000 Euro.

In any case, the diversification of premium berry crops is already a reality, although the first symptoms of market saturation have started to be felt, which has led to a slowdown of the huge expansion of fruits such as raspberries, blackberries and blueberries.

If in the 2016/2017 campaign, raspberries recorded an increase of 18% in the acreage, reaching 1,932 hectares. This year, prospects point to 1,900 hectares, always according to the sector's estimates. This caution on the part of entrepreneurs is understandable if we take into account that prices recorded a downward trend last year, falling by about 15%. Even so, 125,475,000 Euro were invoiced; 4.5% more than in the previous year. This was possible thanks to the 6% increase in the planted area.

All in all, the sector has managed to stagger the production in order to avoid production peaks and adapt to market needs. The wise choice of growing different varieties with different planting cycles has made it possible to supply the market practically all year round. As a result of this, in the previous campaign there was only overproduction during the month of May and in early June. However, this was not a problem caused locally, but a consequence of the arrival of the productions from Central European countries and of the rising temperatures, which led to a decline in prices.

In the case of blackberries and blueberries, the decline in prices was more pronounced, falling by 25% and 27%, respectively. This data actually gives rise to more uncertainty, since it may be an indicator that a ceiling has been reached and that continuity in the expansion may end up resulting in market oversupply. In fact, it is worth recalling that last year the acreage grew by as much as 30%..

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