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COVERING FRESH PRODUCE AROUND THE GLOBE SINCE 1897

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Customs broker has finger on the pulse of imported berries

BY BRIAN GAYLORD

Frank Ramos, founder of Doral, FL-based Customs brokerage The Perishable Specialist Inc., is on top of his game, whether it's knowing what the weather is or how a crop may fare in a given offshore location.

Before much was known about the freeze in Tucuman in northern Argentina that will affect the blueberry crop, Mr. Ramos was aware of the problem when speaking with *The Produce News* in mid-September. The major freeze may knock out as much as "50 percent of the crops in the area," Mr. Ramos said. Estimates vary widely on blueberry crop loss



Frank Ramos

in Tucuman, with later estimates suggesting that as much as 80 percent of the crop may be lost.

"Argentina's cold front was shocking. People who had fields there will get hit," Mr. Ramos said, adding that it will help customers with more demand for product.

The Tucuman area typically harvests blueberries from September to December. Further south in Argentina, the Concordia area typically begins harvesting blueberries a few weeks later.

Mr. Ramos said that Chile would pick up the slack in the wake of lower blueberry volumes from Argentina. He expected blueberry supplies from Chile to be heavy this year. Chilean blues typically run from October into April.

The blueberry harvest in Guatemala typically runs from October to April. Mr. Ramos was slated to fly to Guatemala the week of Sept. 22 with his wife, Ana, who is the company's chief financial officer and who

handles ocean operations for the company. As of May 2008, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has allowed Guatemala to ship blueberries to the United States provided that cold treatment for the Mediterranean fruit fly and South American fruit fly has been completed by the time the berries arrive at the port of Miami.

Guatemala is seeking to be granted access to use fumigation on its blueberries — as has been granted to Chile and Argentina — instead of cold treatment. Toward that end, the Ramoses will travel to Guatemala to meet with their blueberry grower and take part in discussions with U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Ed Shafer, who will be

meeting with several blueberry growers on these issues.

Fumigation is cheaper and speedier for growers. Frank Ramos said that he would benefit "incredibly" if Guatemala were allowed to fumigate its blueberries. Ana Ramos said that Chile is the model for successful fumigation treatments.

Frank Ramos said he will handle organic blackberries out of Costa Rica from October to May. The firm also handles frozen blueberries from Argentina and Chile that are shipped by ocean vessels to Florida, Philadelphia and California. The Perishable Specialist is licensed by the U.S. Customs Service.