

# Peruvian asparagus off to late start, but volume up over 2006

BY TIM LINDEN

Extremely cold weather in Peru has delayed the asparagus crop, but U.S. importers expect heavy volume to start by mid- to late-August and total import to be up 12-15 percent this year.

Asparagus from Peru has increased tremendously in the past decade, doubling to more than 13 million cartons per year since 1997. In the calendar year 2006, which would include the end of crop year 2005 and most of the 2006 crop year, U.S. importers brought in almost 13.2 million cartons of asparagus, according to the Peruvian Asparagus Importers Association. Priscilla Lleras, coordinator for the association, said that for the 2007 crop year, supplies would be up about 12 percent, which would bring supplies to more than 14.7 million cartons. Many importers interviewed expect supplies to increase at least 15 percent, which would bring total volume above the 15 million-carton level.

"The United States continues to be the main market for fresh Peruvian asparagus," said Ms. Lleras

She noted that Peru produces the

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asparagus along its coastal region; specifically the Ica region in the south produces 44 percent of all the asparagus, and La Libertad region in the north produces 48 percent.

Peru's production of asparagus serves two primary markets: green asparagus for the United States, which is packed in five-kilogram (11-pound) boxes, and white asparagus primarily for the European market. In 2006, the United States imported about 58 percent of Peru's total crop.

Experts say that about 70-75 percent of the crop comes by air with the rest coming by ocean vessel. But the ocean liner portion is increasing. APL, which is one of the major ocean carriers operating in that market, has registered double-digit growth in its volume since it introduced a new, faster service in 2005. Vincent Rankin, director of refrigerated sales for the firm, predicted an increase in volume of 20-25 percent this year.

Another neutral observer, Frank Ramos, a customs broker who owns The Perishable Specialists, agreed that the fastest-growing segment is ocean shipments. It is his job to meet the loads as they arrive in the United States, and he said that the ocean liners are definitely increasing their share of business.

"They are getting a lot more business for two reasons," Mr. Ramos said. "Number one, the technology has improved immensely meaning much better arrivals. And number two, the rates are a whole lot better."

Every shipper interviewed echoed the sentiments of Michael Parr of Team Produce when he said in mid-July that July shipments were a disap-

pointment. He said the grass has been running toward the small sizes and yields have been way down. Consequently, prices were up.

Mr. Parr said that jumbo-sized Peruvian asparagus was about \$26 f.o.b. Miami in mid-July, with standards to large going for \$23 and small asparagus spears trading at \$18-\$19. Mr. Parr expected the

expecting larger gains. Dean Simon of Harvest Sensations (a d/b/a of Pro\*Act), which has operations in both Miami and Los Angeles, would not put an exact figure on his company's growth for the 2007 year, but he was clearly talking about a percentage increase much greater than the PAIA estimate.

And Mr. Parr of Team Produce predicted that his company would sell about 40 percent more cartons of Peruvian asparagus in 2007 than it did in 2006.

"We are becoming one of the leaders in asparagus and are growing every year," said Mr. Nir of AYCO Farms.

John-Campbell Barmmer of Chestnut Hill Farms in Miami said, "The total crop is supposed to be up 15 percent, and we will be up at least that much."

Ms. Lleras said that Peruvian asparagus is on a growth curve partially because the entire category has an upward trend. She said that year-round availability of asparagus on U.S. supermarket shelves, sparked by the high-quality supply available from Peru, has led to increased consumption "of this valuable U.S. dietary staple benefiting the entire asparagus industry. Per capita consumption of fresh asparagus has increased by more than 50 percent since 1995," she said.

**The overall asparagus category has been on an upward trend due in part to the year-round availability of asparagus on U.S. supermarket shelves.**

volume to pick up in late August and stay at a very consistently high level for the following five months.

Avi Nir of AYCO Farms in Pompano Beach, FL, said, "I heard it has been the coldest it has been in Peru for 15 or 20 years. Many people say they have never seen temperatures so low. It is still getting down to freezing at night. But by mid-August, they say it is going to warm up and supplies will increase."

Mr. Nir said that growers told him that July yields were only 60 percent of normal because of the weather.

While PAIA is estimating 12 percent growth this year, almost all the importers are



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