

Apple crop big, but movement strong

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U.S. apple grower-shippers still had a lot of 2014-15 product to move as of mid-April, but with a few exceptions, they expected a strong end to the season and a smooth transition into next season's crop.

As of April 1, about 61 million bushels of fresh-market apples had yet to ship, 27% more than last year at the same time, according to the Vienna, Va.-based U.S. Apple Association.

In addition, as of mid-April the 2015-16 crop was running ten days to two weeks ahead of schedule, with Yakima, Wash.-based Domex Superfresh Growers set to begin shipping new-crop galas as early as the first week of August, said Howard Nager, vice president of marketing.

Despite that combination of a big crop and less time to ship it before harvests begin, Nager is confident that most Washington apples will move out in a timely manner.

“There’s a lot of fruit, but companies are doing a terrific job of moving and promoting it.”

Steve Lutz, vice president of marketing for Wenatchee, Wash.-based Columbia Marketing International, agreed.

“We still have a pretty positive outlook on the season. Sales have been strong. We think we’ll finish on a high note.”

On April 14, the U.S. Department of Agriculture reported prices of \$16-18 for galas 72-113 from Washington, down from \$22-30 last year at the same time.

If there is an overlap this summer on galas, fujis, granny smiths and golden delicious, it would likely be 10 days at the most, Nager said.

Red delicious, however, will likely overlap because of problems exporting to Russia and other markets, he said. Shippers like Superfresh typically rely heavily on exports to help move the red crop.

Lutz agreed that marketers would continue to hustle to find homes for some sizes and grades of reds and other mainline varieties. Shippers were being pickier about what went in fresh-market boxes, meaning more fruit was going to processing markets.

Branded apples, by contrast, were in “really solid shape” as of mid-April, he said.

In April, Honeybear Marketing, the marketing arm of Wescott Agri-Products, Elgin, Minn., was winding down its Washington deal with red delicious, galas and Honeycrisp, said Don Roper, the company’s vice president of marketing.

“In general, Washington fruit is starting to see condition issues in fruit which is a result of the excessive heat that we experienced last fall,” Roper said. “Primary issues include internal browning on galas, watercore on fuji. Grannies and (Pink Lady apples) seem to be holding up quite well.”

In April Honeybear was turning its focus to its imported Honeycrisp, gala, Pink Lady, granny smith, fuji and braeburn programs out of Chile and New Zealand, Roper said.

Chile was nearing full production in mid-April and product starting to arrive in Philadelphia, Los Angeles and Seattle, he said. Import volumes will likely be down 10% to 15% for Honeybear this season because of the big Washington crop.

“Demand has started out slow, as we expected, but with retailers experiencing condition issues with their domestic supplies, the last couple of weeks we are now seeing them make the switch to fresh crop Southern Hemisphere fruit,” Roper said April 14.

Chilean fruit was sizing one to two sizes larger than last year as of mid-April, Roper said.

Domex expects to ship Washington-grown Pink Lady apples and braeburns until about July 1 this year, Nager said. Because of soaring demand, the company will likely run out of organic apples earlier, with some varieties winding down about May 1, others June 1.

“The demand for organic galas, fujis, grannys and Honeycrisp has been phenomenal. It’s demand-exceeds. Many retailers are expressing an interest in expanding their programs.”

As of the second week of April, Washington had shipped about 80% of its expected 10 million-box organic apple crop, Nager said.