By Tim Linden

Africa Has Untapped Avocado Potential

Commercial avocado production in Africa has traditionally been concentrated in the warm subtropical northeast region of South Africa. Advantageous temperatures and sufficient rainfall have helped the region become a significant avocado producer and exporter. In 2018, total production was 170,000 tons (350 million pounds) with about half that total being exported, according to the South African Avocado Growers Association website.

The South African season typically extends from February to November with about 17,500 hectares (ha) (about 43,000 acres) under cultivation. The vast majority of the fruit is Hass or Hass-type cultivars. In recent years, there have been other varieties planted and there is interest and activity in increasing avocado production in other African nations to help meet global demand.

Recently, Paulina Theologou, Group Commercial Executive for Westfalia Fruit, noted that several African nations do have the potential to be larger players. Westfalia, a large multinational avocado grower-shipper founded in South Africa, has made significant investments in Mozambique, and Theologou said Kenya, Tanzania and Angola also have potential, albeit with challenges concerning infrastructure. While South Africa's peak season is during the summer, plantings of Gem have helped lengthen the South African season to almost year-round production. The Westfalia executive said the Mozambique winter production window is also complimenting and lengthening the Southern African production window.

South Africa is expected to continue to increase its production with its main advantage being infrastructure development, including roads, ports, electricity and market access. But Mozambique also is considered key to its African growth.

Based on its initial successes in Mozambique, Westfalia recently purchased another 1,000 ha (2,500 acre) farm in the country for further development of plantings. Westfalia Fruto Moçambique (WFM) has an existing 250 ha of avocados that are now coming into production. The seasonality is significantly earlier than the earliest growing areas in South Africa, which will expand the exporter's Africa-originated shipments. In a press release announcing this expansion, Zac Bard, CEO of Westfalia Fruit Africa, said the expansion project has already begun. "Our involvement in Mozambique has attracted a lot of further investment, and Mozambique is going to have a place on the global map in terms of avocados."

The fruit is mainly destined for the European market, but some also will be marketed in South Africa. Mozambique has a tropical climate in most parts of the country, but the province of Manica where WFM is based is known as the cold province, which has a winter period as well. "It is the subtropical climate in a tropical region that gives the early seasonality," Bard said.

Mozambique also is fortunate to have excellent soil and water resources, which points to the potential for increased production in the coming years. Westfalia also is involved with Zimbabwean avocado growers in the area of Chipinge. Further exploring opportunities in Africa, in the highlands of Tanzania Westfalia is working with a group of farmers to develop an industry for the late international marketing window. In Tanzania, Bard said the group of farmers expects their first crop in 2021. "It's a very remote area with excellent natural resources for the late season. We are in the process of testing new cultivars there in addition to the normal cultivars," he said.

Westfalia has announced that it has achieved significant success with the trialing of innovative water-saving irrigation technology in avocado production, which will help potentially open up new regions for avocado production. The company says it achieved water savings of up to 40% on a 180 ha section of one of its African farms where the commercial trial of its low-flow drip technology was conducted almost two years ago, and described the results as 'overwhelming.' Westfalia is convinced this technology is the way forward for avocados grown in tropical, subtropical and Mediterranean climates.

The company says that, in high-rainfall climates, dripper technology has traditionally met with limited success in avocado cultivation, as the high volume of water dispensed tended to displace oxygen in the soil, which had a negative impact on tree health. This problem has been overcome with the introduction of new irrigation technology involving low-flow drippers, which emit less than one liter of water per hour.

Westfalia says it will also be rolling out the novel technology in developing its newest 1,000 ha operation in Mozambique and across the world where it grows avocados, including trials in Chile.