

Columbia Eyeing U.S. Market

(Editor's Note: Juan Camilo Ruiz, the executive director of Avocado Antioqueña Corporation (CORPOHASS), Colombia's new avocado grower and marketing organization, recently answered questions via email about the size and scope of that country's avocado industry. The answers and questions have been edited for clarity because of translation issues.)

FTG: When did Colombian avocado producers begin to switch to the Hass variety of avocados?

Avocados have had a long history in Colombia, to the point of saying that avocado is as innate to us as the sun, wind or water. We have 24,657 hectares under production. About 20 years ago there were some steps to plant some different avocado varieties including the "Hass", the "Reed", the "Loud" and "Collin Reed", but those efforts failed for several reasons: mainly lack of knowledge of growing techniques. About 10 years ago, another effort was made to grow the Hass. This has been expanding geometrically in Colombia, to the point of having grown today to more than 9000 hectares, with most of that being planted in the last five years.

What is the breakdown of production in Colombia?

In Colombia there are 27,657 hectares of avocados distributed as follows: 11,401 hectares of native or Criollo; 9,696 hectares of Hass avocados and 6,560 hectares of green-skinned native varieties. (Source: National Council Avocado Colombia.)

In Colombia the avocado is concentrated mainly in four regions:

1. Caribbean Coast Region: in this



area, the Departments (states) of Bolivar and Cesar are the major producers of avocados. In Bolivar, a native criollo avocado is the main variety. Cesar includes "Serrania del Perija" which is a West Indian avocado producing area of importance.

2. Santanderes Region: In this Department, traditionally grown criollo avocado, mainly in the municipalities of Carmen del Chucuri and San Vicente de Chucuri, are the dominant avocado variety.

3. West Central Region: This is where the Hass avocado is grown in the Department of Antioquia. The Department of Valle also has Hass avocado plantings and the region of Cauca in Popayan Plateau, also provides an important area of

Hass avocado.

4. Central Region: The state of Tolima is very heavily populated with avocados including varieties like Hass, Confetti, Choquete, Semil, Booth, and different varieties of native avocados. The state of Huila has also started interesting projects with the Hass avocado.

How is the production of Hass avocados progressing?

Hass avocado cultivation has been created and developed in three productive zones that are beginning to bear fruit with the recent export of 30 containers of fruit to Europe and will have a significant increase in the short term. Do not forget that Colombia, being a tropical country, has avocado production throughout

the year.

As I said, the cultivation of the Hass avocado has been very dramatic over the past five years. An example is the case of the Department (state) of Antioquia, which has pioneered the development of the crop. The first exports of avocados have been made from this Department. In 2013 it shipped 30 containers of Hass avocado to Europe, specifically the Netherlands entering through Rotterdam, with very good results and great success. For the 2014 season we expect to export 100 containers from Antioquia, with exponential growth in the coming years, according to the rate at which crops are being planted.

What is the total production of avocados in Colombia?

It is difficult to determine the total production volume of Hass avocado for several reasons: there is no census of producers on a regional or national level. The industry is only now beginning negotiating efforts with the United States to establish a national organization to start trading. The quality parameters are far from homogeneous yet. However, our production is probably in the order of 7 or 8 thousand tons (16 million pounds) of Hass avocados in 2013.

But there are several reasons for not achieving the total volume exported:

Many producers are not GLOBAL GAP certified as is required by the European Community.

It can be said that the number of certified producers does not exceed 15 production units. At this time several government entities, including a regional agency in Antioquia, are promoting, helping and sponsoring this certification process. It is expected that by the end of 2013, approximately 100 producers will have acquired the certification, which enables them to export.

In relation to the United States,

although Colombia has signed a free trade agreement with the United States, the standards and requirements for eligibility have not been met yet. We have initiated efforts and are on track with APHIS (Animal & Plant Health Inspection Service) to achieve eligibility with our goal to achieve this in 2014.

Do Colombians also consume a lot of avocados?

The experts estimated that the per capita consumption of avocados in Colombia is 4.5 kilos per person year. We are 45 million Colombians. It is worth noting that the highest consumption of the Hass avocado is in the upper-class sectors who know and appreciate them as a high quality product.

For many people the Hass avocado is not as attractive as the native or green avocado because it is very small relative to the native varieties. Its external appearance when mature makes many people believe that it is damaged, broken or rotten. In the immediate future (July 2013) we will start a campaign to promote the Hass avocado in the Department of Antioquia.

In Colombia we consume about 200,000 tons of all varieties of avocado, but especially native varieties that occur seasonally, especially in the months of March, April and May. We also consume the “confetti” or “green skin”.

As the Hass avocado production is still small, their presence in the markets is not very abundant and there are regions of the country where it is not yet known. But their consumption is increasing.

Does Colombia import avocados?

Paradoxically, though in FAO statistics we appear among the top

five producers worldwide, we are a country that does not fully supply our domestic market. Colombia is an importer of avocados.

Many avocados are not imported legally. Much of the imported product is smuggled from Venezuela, a country that shares a border with us of more than 3,000 kilometers with many crossings unregulated. A similar situation exists in Ecuador, where the border is not so large, but there is very lax or relaxed controls concerning customs.

This is one of the biggest struggles that are currently facing avocado producers. We are asking the government, and specifically the Ministry of Agriculture and the Colombian Agricultural Institute (ICA), for plant protection in Colombia. There is an optimistic attitude regarding these requests.

What is the purpose of the new CORPOHASS and when was it founded? How is it funded?

CORPOHASS was recently established to establish dialogue and negotiation with the United States primarily for the purpose of admissibility to the U.S. market. This is a requirement of the APHIS, because that agency wants to deal with a national organization. This process of creation and formalization has been done in the last two months and is expected to be fully completed in one more month.

It is intended that funding will be similar to Mexico, Peru and Chile, with financial input from producers on a per kilo basis, based on the amount exported. Currently we have only two packing sheds that qualify so the amount has not been established. 