Zespri expects production volumes of European-grown Gold3 kiwifruit (marketed as SunGold) will increase by around one-quarter this season to 5m trays.

The forecast comes as the kiwifruit harvest in Italy enters full swing this week.

Zespri chief operating officer Simon Limmer said the increase was the result of recently-grafted vines reaching full production, with Zespri aiming to double its European SunGold production over the next five years.

“We now have around 1,100 producing hectares of our proprietary gold variety in Italy and this is set to treble to 3,300ha in the next five years – to put this in context, we have 4,600 producing SunGold hectares in New Zealand now,” Limmer explained.

“Twelve-month supply is a key part of Zespri's strategy and this investment aligns our offshore production with the strong increases in New Zealand SunGold volumes, set to double to around 90m trays over the next five years.”

Zespri has partnered with Italian growers for the past 17 years to supply Northern Hemisphere markets with Zespri-branded kiwifruit in the several months a year that New Zealand product is not available.

Around 20 Zespri staff are currently based in Latina, Italy, to support this growing part of the business.

Zespri's board announced the allocation of an added 1,800ha of SunGold licence in Europe earlier this year, the initial 1,200ha of which will be planted in Italy. Zespri also procures green kiwifruit from Europe, providing it meets its grade standards.

“Our New Zealand grower-owners realised the importance of supplying their markets 12 months of the year and set up relationships with kiwifruit growers in the Northern Hemisphere to grow Zespri Kiwifruit in Italy, France, Korea and Japan,” Limmer added.

“All our offshore fruit meets stringent quality standards to make it into a Zespri box, supporting Zespri's premium brand in the market.”