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By Maura Maxwell

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## Chilean blues launch quality drive

### New strategy aims to improve the consistency and quality of exports



**T**he Chilean blueberry industry has launched a new programme to improve the quality and consistency of its members' fresh blueberry exports.

The Chilean Blueberry Committee's Quality System is based on five pillars: varietal selection and renewal; working at field level to grow firmer fruit; better treatment of individual varieties during harvesting; modernising post-harvest technologies and updating quality standards to meet new marketing requirements for the 2019/20 season.

More than 1,000 producers and industry technical staff throughout the country have already been trained on the committee's quality system, which recommends the immediate removal from the export market of 37 varieties which do not meet the new standards.

According to Andres Armstrong, the committee's executive director, "We are working with the support of our member

companies (who represent 80 per cent of Chile's fresh blueberry exports) to transfer knowledge in relation to the quality system and ensure that it is being carried out properly at all stages of production.

"We have organised workshops throughout the country, which include an in-depth review of current international market requirements and a detailed account of the five pillars of the quality system."

One of the most important components of the new system is the focus on varietal selection, the aim being to select only optimal varieties for export and encourage growers to replace those that are not.

"The first step was to check and classify all the varieties that were being exported by Chile. This work was carried out through reports from the industry itself, academic research in post-harvest matters, and quality checks made by the

committee at source every year," Armstrong explained.

According to Julia Pinto, the committee's technical manager, "Growers are very positive about this, because they feel that there is a lot of relevant information that would be difficult to obtain without this type of training. In addition, these informative sessions allow them to make key decisions regarding production."

The committee has organised a road show to visit all the processing and packing centres throughout the country in order to ensure that they are complying with previously established and agreed upon procedures and also to identify areas for ongoing improvement.

Chilean fresh blueberry exports are expected to increase 4 per cent to 115,000 tonnes during the 2019/20 season, mostly as a result of new acreage and more productive varieties being planted over the last few years, particularly in the

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regions of Maule, Ñuble and BioBio. According to the latest planting census an extra 4,000ha of have sprung up over the last four years, bringing Chile's total acreage to 18,374ha.

This season, however, climatic conditions will reduce the productive potential due to a lower accumulation of chill hours registered during the winter, as well as a series of cold

snaps during the spring. In addition, the Chilean Blueberry Committee members have decided not to export a number of older varieties with insufficient shelf life.

Due to all these factors, the committee estimates that the total crop will be around 160,000 tonnes, of which 115,000 tonnes will be exported fresh, 41,000 tonnes will go to the processed market and 4,000 tonnes will be sold domestically.

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