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Imports pose big challenges for asparagus producers

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By Bob Johnson

Asparagus growers are struggling to hang on in the face of lower cost imports that have already captured much of the domestic market.

Ground planted to asparagus statewide has plummeted from 40,000 acres to just 20,000 acres in recent years, according to the California Department of Food and Agriculture. Despite cutting their harvest in half, asparagus growers have still seen prices slowly decline.

"Five years ago we grew 1,000 acres of asparagus, now we're down to 350 acres. The window is much smaller than it used to be. We used to go from mid February through June, but the canneries have shut down, and the freezers have shut down. The fresh market goes to late May if we're lucky," said Ed Zuckerman, president of Zuckerman Heritage Farms in Stockton.



George Biagi is general manager of Zuckerman Heritage Farms in Stockton, which in recent years has reduced its asparagus production from 1,000 acres to 350 acres.

There are still a few opportunities left for growers in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, which fairly recently was the hub of a strong asparagus industry.

"We're custom growing for someone based in Southern California. They are mainly an avocado grower, but they want to be able to offer asparagus all year and we fill a slot," Zuckerman said.

But the market windows are fewer, further apart and not nearly as rewarding as they used to be. Over the last five or six years Peru has become the giant in the fresh asparagus industry.

"When I was growing up around here, there was 75,000 acres of asparagus. Now there's less than 9,000. I think if you keep it at this level you can survive. There's still a little niche that lasts about 45 days," said George Biagi, Zuckerman Heritage Farms general manager.

Biagi said he figures that delta growers can still serve markets during a narrow 45-day window in April and early May, when Mexico's harvest is done, and growers in Peru are between the two harvests they can get because they are on the equator.

"It used to be the price was best early in the season, but now Mexico is harvesting by then. Unless there is a severe weather situation somewhere else, our price is not very good. We averaged \$36 for a 28-pound crate last year. Ten years ago \$36 was making money, but the cost of production has gone way up, so now it's not," Zuckerman said.

This story is repeated throughout the struggling asparagus sector.

"Acreage is probably half what it was in 2003, and production is probably half," said Gary Lucier, U.S. Department of Agriculture agricultural economist.

Lucier has the figures that tell the grim story of the decline of the asparagus industry. Last year, 90 percent of domestic consumption was imported, up from less than 60 percent at the turn of the century. Lower cost operations in Peru and Mexico account for 99 percent of the imports. And our shipments to

Canada and Japan have shrunk to just 20 million pounds.

"Given the current trends, they probably won't be growing asparagus in the delta in 10 years, but any one of a number of scenarios could develop. You can't say anything is certain," Lucier said.

The one development that could turn this tide would be a mechanical harvester, which could negate much of the cost advantage of the imports.

"It's a tough one with the imports, it's very difficult. We're downsizing next year, we're probably downsizing more. A mechanical harvester would help tremendously if you could find one that would work. Anything that will reduce the need for labor will help. There really isn't a mechanical harvester that will work in a commercial field. They're too slow," said Richard Marchini, who grows asparagus in the Stockton area.

There may finally be some good news on the mechanical harvester front.

"This past season we identified an invention that looks like it can work," said Carter Clary, Washington State University assistant professor of horticulture and landscape architecture.

The promising new machine has a rack with 12 to 15 reels that are 18-inches in diameter. Each reel has 3 or 4 arms. In front of these reels is an optic sensor that can recognize an asparagus spear.

In addition to keeping delta asparagus growers in business, a mechanical harvester could also change the structure of the asparagus sector.

"A mechanical harvester that would do the job would have capital costs so high as to be prohibitive for such a short season," Zuckerman said. He said he thought the right machine might open up the possibility of custom harvesting operations.

One very promising feature of this machine is that it covers a far broader area than any previous mechanical asparagus harvester. Earlier machines would only span a 3-foot to 5-foot path. But this latest machine spans 10 feet, which could completely change the width of asparagus beds.

"This machine has about a 10-foot-wide swath. That means you're going to almost double your yields compared to beds that have to be narrow enough to allow for hand harvesting," Clary said.

Another promising feature of the new machine is that it can travel faster, maybe even as fast as 4 miles per hour.

"This thing could probably do 2, 3 or 4 acres an hour," Clary said. Previous machines looked like they could harvest that much in a day, rather than in an hour.

After this year's promising trials, the Washington State researchers plan another set of trials with this new harvester next season.

Work has also begun on developing new asparagus varieties that would be more amenable to machine harvest.

University of California at Riverside asparagus breeder Neil Stone is working on this in cooperation with Clary, who has already relayed the general specifications of the varieties that would be best suited to mechanical harvest.

"We want a variety that produces a lot of spears in a flush. If we can determine when and where the spears will come up, that's a plus," Stone said.

Mechanical harvest of asparagus may be the future for the California sector. But that future is not coming any time soon.

"We're a long way from that. That's some of the work we've just started: the first trials will be planted next year," Stone said.

In the meantime, delta growers are finding some local markets where they are largely shielded from the low cost competition.

"My brother sells at farmers markets around the state. He sold 7,000 to 8,000 crates, out of our 30,000 crates, and he gets a good price. That market is still viable," Zuckerman said.

But in the long run the international markets will be decisive for the future of the delta asparagus sector.

According to Lucier, one possibility is that the cost of shipping will go up significantly, putting Mexico and Peru at a disadvantage.

There are still some outlets overseas, but nothing compared to the high end Asian markets of a few years ago.

"We are shipping more to Europe. The price is not great but it is an outlet for extra large and jumbo spears. We do very little to Japan anymore because their economy is not great. It's become pretty untenable," Zuckerman said.

The market with Japanese consumers has been decisive because they have been willing to pay top dollar for the best asparagus. That market is so important that plant breeders look at asparagus varieties in terms of their yields of export quality—spears that are between 7/16 and 10/16 of an inch in diameter, green, tight, with tapered heads and no defects.

If the Japanese market recovers, UC breeders are already on the way toward the development of varieties that out perform even the recently released DePaoli asparagus in the yields of export quality asparagus.

"We have six years of data, but it is only from trials in Riverside," Stone said.

The Riverside data is impressive—from 2004 to 2008 the best of the experimental numbered varieties produced nearly twice as much export quality asparagus as the recently released DePaoli. The most promising variety produced 20,000 pounds of export grade asparagus over those five years, while DePaoli produced 10,600 pounds of export quality product.

But good performance in trials on the UC Riverside campus does not guarantee good performance in the delta, where most of the commercial asparagus is grown.

"Asparagus varieties tend to be very specific. It depends on how the variety performs in a specific climate," Stone said.

The DePaoli variety, for example, has performed exceptionally in Riverside, generally very well in the delta, but has failed to match the previous standard variety in trials on McDonald Island outside of Stockton.

And asparagus breeding has become an international process.

"If we can get three years of data from some international trials we will release some of the varieties. We're planting these in production areas from around the world, but it will take four years to get that data," Stone said.

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