

Good demand and stronger prices for wild blueberries



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Peter Rideout brought good news to the Wild Blueberry Producers Association of Nova Scotia's annual meeting.

Topics : [Department of Agriculture](#) , [Food Institute](#) , [The North](#) , [Maine](#) , [Quebec](#) , [South America](#)

The Provincial Department of Agriculture's Senior Planning and Development Officer told the WBPANS members their industry had good demand and stronger prices for the 2011 harvest.

Total production this year was 226.3-million lbs for the four Atlantic provinces, Quebec and the State of Maine, Rideout reported. NS harvested 33-million lbs., New Brunswick 24-m, Prince Edward Island 10.3-m, Newfoundland 500,000 lbs., Quebec 70-m ("a dramatic increase" over 2010's 30-m) and Maine 88.5-m.

NS was down somewhat from its five-year average of 35-m, he said. Because of poor weather conditions, there was a lower harvest in the major high bush blueberry regions in North America of the Pacific Northwest and Michigan.

Rideout said there was a good, strong demand for the cultivated blueberries; but due to wet conditions in the late part of the harvest there was an 8% diversion from the fresh market to the processing plants. **As of Oct. 31, the Food Institute reported a softening in the high bush price from \$2 to \$1.90-\$1.80.**

Rideout said South America has had a good start to its 2011-2012 season, with Argentine exports up by six times over last year.

But "South America is not a threat to our industry." Instead, it keeps demand up for blueberries by producing when we don't providing a constant fruit supply to meet market demand.

Promotional support, particularly from the Chilean industry, has pushed demand for blueberries by promoting its taste, he said. "We believe it has increased the demand for wild blueberries for producers."

The North American wild blueberry market demand has also exceeded supply, increased by the introduction of new frozen fruit products, Rideout said. "We are back to price premium over high bush for frozen berries of \$2-\$2.05, FOB the Maine processing plants."

Europe has had a good bilberry crop that has been getting higher prices and this is good for North American wild blueberries. They cost less, have superior quality, are backed by an industry capable of producing consistent fruit with traceability, whereas bilberries are gathered from forest land.

The European market has also responded well to the industry's promotional programs. Europe is growing more high bush blueberries; but there is uncertainty over the currency. If the Euro is significantly devalued it will reduce European purchasing power, Rideout observed.

The 2010 Japanese jam manufacturers delegation visit paid dividends with their marketing commitment for 2010-2011. In spite of natural disasters, the Japanese market has rebounded and there is good demand, a good price for ingredients, the strongest Yen in decades and good economic growth due, in part, to post-disaster recovery and rebuilding.

Rideout felt the future challenge will be diversifying the customer base as currently 70 per cent of wild blueberries go into glass jars. "We are getting an increasing margin of a decreasing market."

The next biggest market in Japan is yogurt and dairy products.

Japan also has the most rapidly aging population in the industrialized world and it is increasingly over-shadowed by China and South Korea, Rideout said. "In the last couple of years we have doubled and re-doubled wild blueberry exports to Korea."

When speaking about China he noted, "We don't want to increase demand there if we don't have the fruit."

INFORMED FIELD MANAGEMENT DECISIONS

WBPANS President John Quinn said pricing information is important and essential in making informed field management decisions: deciding what fields to manage or leave untended; the intensity of field management; to buy or sell land, or not harvest a field.

"There is no way you can predict the price; but you can predict a trend."

Quinn told delegates the factors that will set the 2012 field price for growers included: the level of berries in storage from the 2011 harvest; the price of processed berries; the total volume of cultivated production in 2012, and the total yield in 2012.

In 2009, the field price for growers hit a record low of 35¢ per lb.

Quinn noted cold storage stocks have now returned to their 2008 levels. "Early in 2011 it became clear the levels of frozen berries would come down to reasonable levels."

As of Nov. 14, wild blueberries were around \$2.15 per lb., FOB at the Maine processors.

Last August, the grower price was around 77¢ per lb. and Quinn personally felt there was room for an additional price increase for growers.