

EAST AFRICA

Certification a costly key

Kenya may be Africa's largest avocado exporter, but the high cost of certification remains a barrier for farmers harbouring aspirations of boosting their exports to the European market

TOM JOYCE

tom@fruitnet.com

Although fairly new to the avocado market, this being the company's fourth season, Kenyan exporter Kyome Fresh has quickly built up a sizeable group of avocado farmers. The company provides much-needed encouragement and assists its farmers in following the GlobalGAP certification procedure. However, many challenges remain, not least regarding the relatively high cost of attaining such accreditation.

"Our growers find it difficult to meet the demands of European retailers," says managing director Grace Mueni.

David Musyoka, senior agronomist at Kenyan producer Kandia Fresh Produce lists several challenges facing avocado growers in Kenya.

"The main challenges we face are climate change; the economic crisis, which has led to high input costs at the farm; fluctuations in currency; and strict market requirements that obligate small-scale growers to gain costly certifications," he says. "Avocados grow naturally in Kenya, with little need for interference both during production and in post-harvest handling.

"However, EU requirements demand a level of compliance that is standard for all products, and avocado farmers find some of these requirements too formal, irrelevant and unjustifiably expensive. The GlobalGAP team needs to identify an option that is cheaper and less complex for small-scale farmers in developing countries."

"To sell to European retailers the fruits have to be certified. We have negotiated many deals for avocados, only to be asked to produce the GlobalGAP certificate. Unfortunately, the cost of these certifications are very prohibitive for farmers in Kenya."

Particularly galling is the fact that many Kenyan avocado growers could well be considered organic were the necessary

certifications attained. "Most farmers in Kenya grow their avocados in an organic way, without the use of chemicals, but since we have not fully adopted all the particular requirements for organic farming we are not able to market our produce as organic," says Ms Mueni.

However, this is one area into which she sees Kenyan farmers moving in the future. "Growers are continuously looking for ways in which they can add value to their products. Organics is one possibility for us," she says. "When I embark on the process of certification, I will be interested to see if we can have our avocados certified as organic."

Before the close of the season, Kyome Fresh expects to produce 662 tonnes of

major challenge."

A further challenge is to get better returns for growers. "When the fruit is on the market, it is usually compared with produce from Israel, South Africa and Peru, which have no blemishes on the skin," says Ms Mueni. "Ours have black spotting, and buyers tend to go for unblemished fruit, so Kenyan avocados fetch lower prices. This of course means that exporters and farmers receive lower incomes."

Both higher freight costs and the economic crisis are two more factors that are currently causing problems. In such an environment, the assistance provided by the Pesticides Initiative Programme (PIP) is crucial. "Thanks



Most avocados in Kenyan are grown organically

Avocado producer Jaksons Uganda produces and exports African Jumbo avocados. These have a weight ranging between 350g and around 1kg per fruit. According to director Kavuma Jaksons, the company intends to plant approximately 200 new avocado trees this year and also expects to start producing the Fuerte variety.

As such, export volumes to its UK and Swiss customers are expected to be much higher this season. "We are currently exporting 500kg per week," says Mr Jaksons. "Last year, we only managed an average of 180kg per week."

However, Mr Jaksons adds that the costs of certification remain a problem for avocado growers. "The costs of certification are definitely prohibitive for individual farmers," he says. "However, the concept of group certification could be a big help for many."

avocados, mainly of the Hass and Fuerte variety, be that around 30 forty-foot containers, double what the company shipped last year.

"Previously, we only exported to France and the UK, but right now we are also exporting to the Netherlands and Spain," she reveals. "We have also been exploring the possibility of shipping to Turkey and Russia, but the logistics surrounding seafreight shipments is still a

to the support of PIP, we have gained GlobalGAP certification for our vegetables, which has helped us to increase exports," says Ms Mueni. "We are currently discussing with PIP about having our avocado farmers certified. This possibility has encouraged us to pursue more European markets, with the hope that, very soon, we will have our farmers certified." ■