

Cherry shipping stemmed?

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[Pacific Shipper](#)

Air cargo capacity is becoming perishable for growers depending on a seasonal rush

The agriculture world is finding that the most perishable commodity in the air these days is capacity.

Rising costs and declining demand pushed many passenger airlines to reduce flights late last year and in the first quarter, sharply curtailing the belly space available to shippers. Add to that the tougher security rules hitting the air cargo industry and shippers that have depended on a steady flow of readily available belly space are starting to feel a bit bruised.

According to figures from the Air Transport Association, flights by U.S. carriers were cut by 5.2 percent in the third quarter of 2008 and 9.3 percent in the fourth quarter compared to the same periods in 2007, and will be cut by almost 11 percent during the first three quarters of 2009, compared to the same period in 2008.

Mark Powers, vice president of the Northwest Horticultural Council in Yakima, Wash., said shippers of produce in the Northwest are facing tough questions about the market for their goods in a weak economy and how much capacity will be available.

The biggest crop shipped by air out of the Northwest is cherries, with roughly 50 percent of the business going out on passenger aircraft. The peak cherry season in mid-spring offers a particular feast for growers and airlines alike as consumers in Asia look for the season's crop.

But Asian economies are in a sharp decline and airlines in Japan, where the demand for cherries is the greatest, are putting capacity plans in full reverse.

If there is a significant drop in capacity without an equal drop in demand, an alternative would be to go with freighter airlines, which in years past have provided cargo aircraft bulging with pallets of cherries. But Powers said the cherry crop in 2008 was less than normal, reducing the amount of capacity needed.

The big question for cherry growers is how big the crop will be this summer.

The growers are also concerned about the requirements for screening produce such as cherries, Powers said.

The TSA's Certified Cargo Screening Program puts enormous pressure on forwarders and airlines to screen goods before they can fly, and the screening process is an enormous concern for growers that prize airlines' speed over all other attributes.

"The logistics of screening at an airport by freight forwarders is very difficult to imagine because there isn't an approved screening device that can handle a full pallet (of boxed cherries)," Powers told Washington state's Tri-City Herald newspaper.

Powers said that in a typical two-month cherry growing season, a third of the state's cherry crop, or some 1.3 million cartons of cherries worth \$50 million, is exported on passenger aircraft. Without an approved screening method that can handle a full pallet of fruit, or any type of produce, each of those 1.3 million boxes will have to be opened and visually inspected. This would obviously have a major impact on the speed at which produce can be shipped to market, usually 24 to 48 hours after they are picked and crated at the orchards.

He told the newspaper that half of the exported cherries could be at risk under the new requirements.

Also of concern to shippers is the cost of hiring more workers and getting them certified to TSA standards.

Brandon Fried, executive director of the **Airforwarders Association**, said the TSA is working on a "homogenous commodities mixer" for perishables that will be able to screen a pallet and detect any substance other than the single commodity, such as cherries or roses, on the pallet. "But the problem with normal air freight is that a load will have so many different commodities on a single pallet, even perishables," he said. "So it is of no practical use right now."

Fried also noted inspecting individual boxes is impractical because some perishables such as fish can be packed in containers that are sealed in at a guaranteed temperature for a long period of time. To open the container breaks both the seal and guarantee, even in a cooling facility.

"Most shippers tell us that they just don't want their boxes compromised once they leave the shipper's facility," Fried said.

Two companies, [Smiths Detection](#) in the U.K. and Rapiscan in the U.S., have built screening devices that could work with perishables, although the screening devices have not yet been authorized by the TSA, Powers said.