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PRIMEUR



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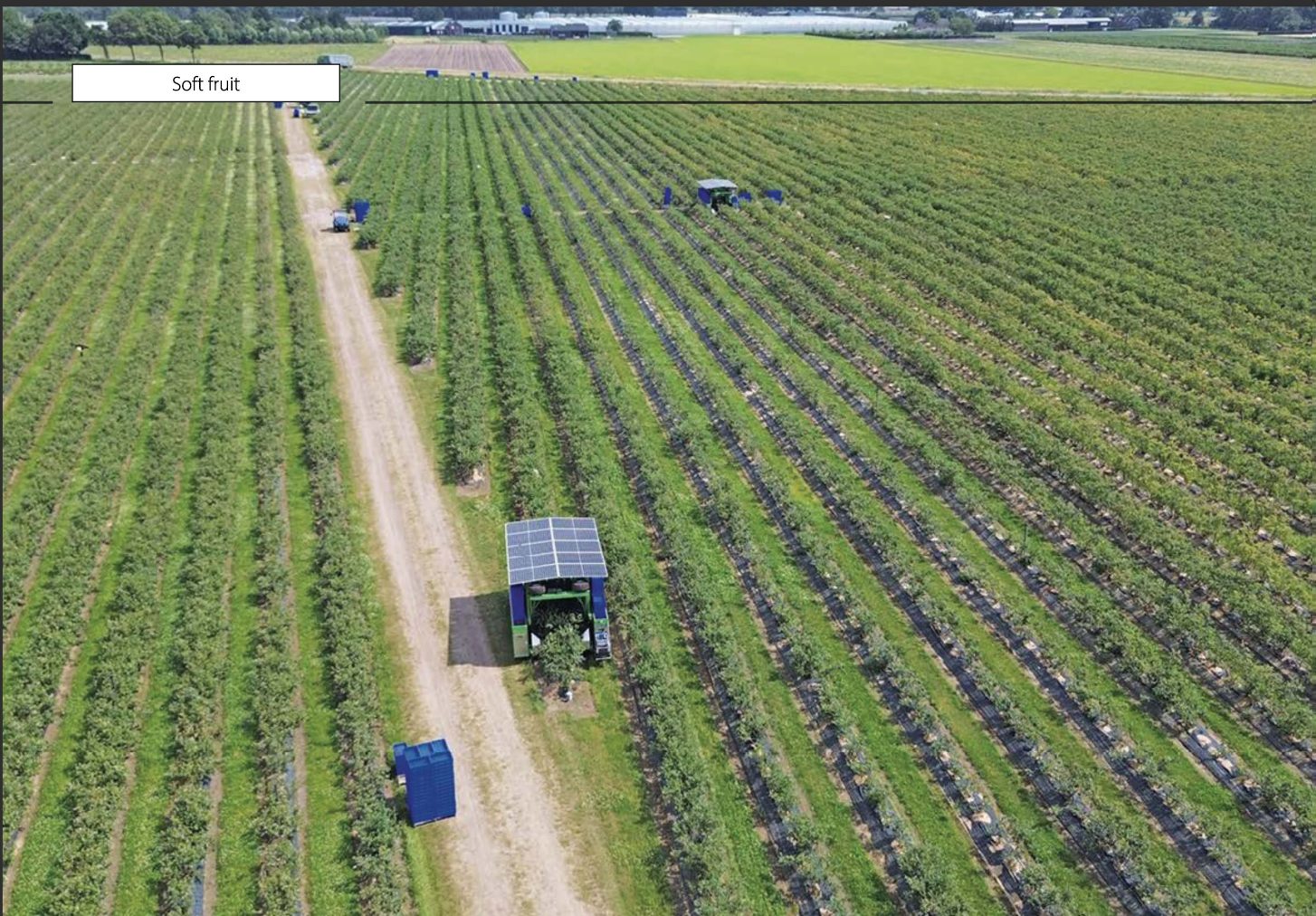
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Marcel Beelen, FineField:

“Within 5-15 years, fresh berry harvesting will be entirely mechanized”

In 2021, after developing several prototypes, FineField sold its first mechanized berry harvester for the fresh market. This Dutch company has since sold dozens of these machines. Business Director Marcel Beelen expects the entire fresh market will eventually switch to mechanical harvesting. “Opinions differ on how quickly that will happen. Growers say labor savings is the only cost component they can still address,” he begins.

The machine manufacturing startup had to take a step back soon after its launch. “In 2022, demand genuinely took off, partly due to the coronavirus crisis, when growers struggled to find staff. But that was also a very challenging year for us. We had to deal with a parts crisis. Some parts were unavailable, so we had to make some adjustments to the machines. Prices also skyrocketed. Parts

we normally paid €100 for suddenly cost €2,000. We sold 12 machines that year.”

“But you only get paid once you’ve delivered the goods, so it was quite nerve-wrecking, also because they were untested machines. We viewed it as a valuable test with those customers, and based on their feedback, we made the necessary changes. As a result, we took a

break for a year or two. Concrete interest in mechanical harvesting, however, started to boom. We’ve now sorted out those teething problems, and the market is slowly realizing something must change,” says Marcel.

MACHINES REQUIRE DIFFERENT BUSINESS PRACTICES

He notes that interest in Europe lags behind that of the North American market. “There are several reasons for that. Europe has traditionally not used machine harvesting for the fresh market, only for the final harvest for the industry. Also, European product quality standards are generally higher. Companies, therefore, find it difficult to switch to machine harvesting, as it requires a completely different way of doing business. You used to have to recruit people, orga-



nize housing, and manage the harvest. That's all changing. In the United States, in, say, Oregon and Washington - where the industrial berry market is larger than the fresh one - people are far more familiar with harvesters."

"We want to truly focus on the fresh market. We see opportunities in particular on the East and West Coast, in California, where labor costs are quite high," explains Marcel. Despite the increasing blueberry production in Latin America, he does not yet foresee significant growth markets in those countries. "Acreage-wise, countries like Chile and Peru are certainly interesting, but they'll first have to invest in new varieties; only then will the machines follow. Currently, for instance, the low-chill Peruvian varieties have as many as 20 picking moments. Mechanical picking isn't suitable for that. However, with new varieties, peak production is more likely, and mechanical harvesting will become more relevant."

With US-based Fall Creek as a shareholder, FineField is closely involved in the development of new varieties. "Many new varieties are larger, but also softer than the small berries, so it's a search for the best varieties for mechanical picking. We're focusing particularly on the high- and mid-chill varieties. We keep an eye on the low-chill market, but it isn't a priority for us right now. There's market demand for harvesting machines that can also operate in tunnels, but in our view,

specific machines need to be developed for this purpose," Marcel points out.

"We're in frequent contact with investors who are establishing new fields based on mechanical harvesting, or want to adapt their fields for mechanical harvesting. Machine picking, however, does require adjustments on the part of growers. For example, you need more technical knowledge in-house, you must have enough spare parts, and the operator must be well-trained. You also need to organize your relationship with your machine supplier well. So there is also a learning curve for the grower. Data also plays an increasingly prominent role. Our machines collect a slew of data, which we can use to help our clients. And we're actively implementing AI applications that help optimize the harvest."

MECHANICAL VS QUALITY HAND-PICKING

"Some people are still skeptical about the quality of mechanically harvested berries compared to hand-picked. But some growers say mechanical picking results in better quality than when they used to harvest by hand. The fruit's firmness and shelf life are generally comparable to hand-picked berries. Machines obviously have a higher wastage rate because they pick green and soft berries, too, which pickers would leave. So, you have to sort the berries afterward," says Beelen.

"Yet, hand-picking is very inconsistent. One worker picks very cleanly, while

another throws everything in the crate. Although the machine we currently supply is fully operational, we're continuously working on three issues: the quality of berries coming out of the machines, loss during harvesting, and reliability. It's an ongoing process. That's why we build all our machines with the option of retrofitting, so we can always replace the old machines when modifications are made and not neglect our first buyers."

A major advantage over manual harvesting is that you can use the machines non-stop. "In France, for example, growers use their machines in three shifts. The only time they're not used is between 4:00 and 8:00 a.m., because of the dew. You must, however, be aware that you must clean the machines thoroughly. Berries produce juice, and when that sugar water dries, it becomes very sticky," Marcel continues, adding that during the second harvest, when the bushes have sufficient berries, FineField machines have a capacity of 1 to 1,4 tons per hour. When you include the first and third harvests, the average during the season is around 800 kg/hr.

RECOUPED IN TWO SEASONS

Marcel reckons investing in such a machine is, thus, a no-brainer. "In terms of return on investment, you can recoup the machine's cost for one season in 18 months. If you can use it for two seasons per year, you'll make your money back within a year. It does cost growers €350,000 to €400,000, so they must be able to afford it. Subsidy options vary greatly from country to country. The Netherlands and Germany, for instance, have hardly any. Eastern European countries often do, and in the United States, the options vary from state to state."

According to Marcel, what sets the FineField machine apart is that it is the only one specifically designed for the fresh market. "Many other machines intended for industrial use are also positioned in the fresh market. That, though, requires a different approach. Since the berry market is large enough, those players will always serve the local market. I predict it will take five to 15 years for the entire blueberry market to switch to mechanical harvesting," Marcel concludes. •

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