

Gentle giants

Blueberry industry continues toward machine harvest for fresh market.

By Ross Courtney

At Pinebloom Farms in Southwest Georgia, Sam Gray uses three FineField Harvy 500 mechanical blueberry harvesters.

Each solar-powered machine gets a crew of three: one to drive and two to follow behind to manage the lugs on each side. Four Burro automated carts deliver empty bins and haul away full ones. The autonomous implements deliver full bins to a centralized refrigerated truck operated by four workers. That's a total of 10 people harvesting his 120 acres of blueberries.

Gray has a "very specific workflow for these harvesters" on his family's farm, he said.

The U.S. blueberry industry continues its march toward mechanical harvest for the fresh market. As growers like Gray dial in the details of pairing technology with laborers, two front-runners have emerged in the engineering race.

Meanwhile, scientists continue to research new varieties, best practices and food safety related to machine harvest. "We've been at this for over 10 years," said Lisa Wasko DeVetter, professor of small fruits horticulture at Washington State University.

Researchers have conducted numerous projects to determine how drop distance and different catch surfaces affect bruising. They are continuing with new veins of study into how shaking speed and motion affect quality and how long machine-harvested fruit can be stored. They have also begun exploring the food safety implications of mechanical surfaces, while breeders look for harvester-friendly varieties that resist bruising and grow on uniform bushes with narrow crowns. Berry-by-berry robotic picking is



VIDEO: Watch Pinebloom Farms use mechanical harvesters for fresh-market blueberries at: goodfruit.com/media.

FineField is a relative newcomer in North America with the Harvy 500, the seventh iteration of the Harvy line, said Selynn Vong, sales and marketing manager.

The company has sold about 30 units in Europe but only seven in the United States, all in Georgia. On the West Coast, FineField rents five machines to industry mainstays Driscoll's, Sakuma Bros. and Fall Creek Nursery. The company next plans to target the Peruvian market.

Growers East and West

Gray's family, which also grows corn, cotton, peanuts, grain sorghum and citrus, first rented FineField machines in 2023 and began purchasing their own in 2024. They were the first U.S. adopter of the tool.

Gray estimates that one of the machines costs less than a dorm that holds 60 employees, helping his farm reduce its reliance on an H-2A program that fluctuates in cost and complexity.

This year, the Trump administration changed how the Adverse Effect Wage Rate was calculated, in most cases lowering the H-2A wage floor. Georgia's dropped from \$16.08 to \$10.52 per hour. Georgia does not have a state-mandated minimum wage.

That might have reduced Pinebloom's need for mechanization, but the Trump administration's immigration crackdown slowed H-2A visa applicants, causing delays for many workers at

the Mexican border this spring. That delay then pushed their employers behind schedule.

So, the machines again came to the rescue for Gray, whose 180 H-2A workers arrived from Mexico two weeks late.

The machine harvesters may not be as nimble as human hands, but he feels safer betting on the mechanical tools than the federal government's shifting approaches to the H-2A program.

"This could all go belly-up," he said. "I could sell the harvester, but I can't really sell the dorm."

Grower Cornelius Timmermans of Whatcom County, Washington, estimates the suspended catch plates of his Oxbo equipment bump his machine-harvested crop from 33 percent fresh grade with a traditional harvester to roughly 50 percent. Berries that make fresh grade typically come off the bush on the first pass, so the efficiency of the new harvester allows him to sell to the fresh market later into the season than he otherwise could.

"It's keeping me in the fresh market a little bit longer than I was before," Timmermans said.

He places five people — one driver, two sorters and two stackers — on each Oxbo. They harvest in one day what 50 pickers would by hand, if he could find enough. The last time he advertised for workers, 30 called to inquire. Not one showed up for work.

"We have to go in this direction," he said. "This labor issue is not going to go away." ●



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