

Case Studies

Business Background – African Blue

Located in Mouley Bouselham, south of Tangiers, African Blue is a Blueberry joint venture between; Agrogailles, Costa Berry Exchange, a world leader in blueberry genetics & Total Berry. The venture was established to provide Total Berry's customers with an alternative to Chilean stored/seafreight fruit in Feb-Mar. Moroccan Blueberries also provide another source to compete with Spain in May/Jun. It is also part of our ongoing strategy to offer our retailers consistent varieties throughout the year.

(Agrogailles was established in 1997 in North Morocco in the Province of Kenitra. Agrogailles is now run by two partners, Avi Albert Weizman and Bennani Abdellatif. Following the construction of the Packhouse, Agrogailles started supplying to Total Berry in 2001. Agrogailles was the first soft fruit supplier from Morocco to gain GlobalGAP accreditation & to be approved by the UK retailers.

At African Blue, the first plants went into the ground in 2007 and there are currently 200 Ha planted with 80% of that in production. Target figure is 400 Ha in production by the end of 2018. The first ever Moroccan Blueberries were supplied in 2012, with forecasts for 3000 Tonnes to be produced in 2015 season. Production is spread over 6 farms situated close to the Agrogailles Ouled Mesbah Packhouse.

African Blue grow a mixture of early, mid & late season varieties providing a continuous supply throughout the season which runs from Dec to Jun. All varieties are from the Costa Berry Exchange breeding programme and are exclusive to Total Berry in the UK. Varieties such as Arana & Kimba deliver outstanding size & flavour and have been in high demand for the Top Tier line since their release.

In addition to the commercial plantings there are 2 blueberry trial sites managed by a dedicated team of people. Over 40 selections from the Costa Berry Exchange programme are currently being trialled & samples are sent regularly for feedback from the retailers. Trials of blueberries grown in substrate instead of soil & water management projects are also underway & planned for 2015.

The Packhouse, which is BRC grade A certified, was built in 2000 and further improvements were made in 2003.

African Blue currently employ up to 2400 permanent & temporary staff in peak periods with around 95 permanent workers.





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Tell us about the activity the nominees have undertaken in the areas you have highlighted above.

Ethics

The soft fruit sector in Morocco with its seasonal use of staff has historically faced challenges in complying with labour law. Improvements focussing originally on Strawberries in their sister company Agroberry were then adopted by African Blue. The team at African Blue took on the challenge & taking it further created a robust centrally managed employee database covering all six of their farms. A Human Resources Manager was employed in 2013 and a department created to implement the changes required. One of the key changes made has been the introduction of a digital photo ID card for all employees. This card system required each employee to provide ID documentation prior to issue. Cards are used to 'clock in' & 'clock out' and ensure that payments are accurate & that hours are recorded & monitored closely. This system is linked to the HR office enabling the generation of payslips & CNSS to be deducted as appropriate. Trials of bonus schemes & incremental pay increases are now underway to reward workers for good performance with the aim of increasing worker loyalty & morale which in turn will result in a reduction of staff turnover levels.

The empowerment of the workers has led to the formation of a workers committee. Elections took place 1 year ago overseen by the HR office, & regular meetings are held throughout the year.

Education

Following original guidance from Total Berry in writing an Ethical Action Plan, the business adopted key work streams to improve the skills base of their workforce. Two stage training with the support of several UK retailers were delivered in Morocco in 2014. The aim of the training was to ensure all levels of the business understood the values of Ethical Trade, and its impact on the Company as a whole. Preferred training supplier 'Partner Africa' delivered their Ethical Trade Awareness Programme & African Blue were the first soft fruit company to undertake this training. Building on this several months later with Improved Workplace Communication training focussing this time on the Managers & Supervisors to help support the establishment & strengthening of worker committees. African Blue have also participated in in-country training provided by Oxfam concerning awareness of benefits provided through the social security system (CNSS).

Efficiency

Historically Blueberries have been grown commercially in North America, Chile, Argentina & Australia. To respond to a demand from UK retailers for fresher, better quality fruit, African Blue was established to provide an alternative to Chilean fruit in the Jan-Mar window cutting the transport time down considerably from 48 days to 5 days.

Blueberries from Morocco are usually transported by road to the UK. In 2015 fruit will be transported in bulk cartons firstly via road freight and then later by seafreight trials, using the efficiencies successfully practised by Total Berry during the Southern Hemisphere season. Initial road trials have demonstrated a 55% increase in volume of fruit per vehicle.

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African Blue are also carrying out commercial trials in 2015 to convert their growing system over from a soil based bed system into a potted substrate system. This system has a number of environmental and agronomic advantages. One of the major benefits of potted substrate growing is that no soil fumigants are used in the fruit production &

irrigation can be fine-tuned to reduce water use. An increase in yield & denser planting will also be obtained via this system allowing African Blue to maximise the use of good quality land.

The introduction of the bonus schemes & pay increases has incentivised the pickers resulting in an increase in the number of kilos picked per hour.

Summary

African Blue have led the way in addressing the demand for fresh, premium quality Northern Hemisphere Blueberries in Feb-Apr. They were the first Moroccan based company to export Blueberries to the UK and have provided Total Berry with several 'first to market' opportunities with Total Berry exclusive varieties Arana & Kimba. Today they are the largest Blueberry production company in Morocco.

Worker welfare standards are the highest of any soft fruit company in the country. All members of staff regardless of whether they are permanent or part-time seasonal, in line with Moroccan law have equal rights to benefits & security. With the digital ID system, local seasonal workers can easily return every year providing them with a regular income. The experience of these workers, together with that of the permanent management team, enables African Blue to drive their continuous improvement programme across all areas of the business. As part of this programme, training is actively promoted at all levels focussing on communication & awareness of the ETI code.

Innovation is at the forefront of everything they do demonstrated by their commitment to trialling new varieties, novel growing techniques & water improvement schemes.