

The Case for Specialty Crops in Belize

By Geoffrey de Sibert

Specialty Crops provide a potentially significant opportunity in Belize. There is a fairly broad repertoire of vegetables grown in Belize, although only on a scale sufficient to provide a modest amount of supply for domestic demand. Currently, only permanent fruit crops such as citrus, bananas, papayas and mangoes are grown on an export scale. Yet Belize possesses the soil conditions, climate conditions and growing seasons that indicate that it should be able to supply a broad selection of vegetables to the North American market during the key December to March window when domestic US production is significantly curtailed due to weather. Belize also possesses the right conditions to grow certain other non-agronomic crops ranging from peanuts and chia to sea-island cotton.

The Specialty Crops opportunity consists of an initial effort to evaluate a series of vegetables (with multiple varieties for each species) on a scale large enough to determine whether they can meet required quality and production cost benchmarks to be suitable candidates for the export market. Typically, the value per acre of Specialty Crops can be up to five to ten times higher than the value of agronomic crops, although production costs are correspondingly higher as is the risk of loss. And while relative farming margins might be comparable to the current (historically very high) margins seen in agronomic farming, absolute farming margins per acre of land are commensurately higher.

Storage & Transport

There is no infrastructure for Specialty Crops operations in Belize today. Accordingly, greenfield construction of cooling, packing and storage facilities would be needed. The key transport methods for Specialty Crops exports, namely refrigerated trucks and containers, are currently available in Belize at reasonable costs. High value added crops that would require refrigerated air transport would benefit from the extensive air services to Houston, Dallas, Miami, Atlanta, Charlotte and Newark. Moreover, given the limited air cargo currently being shipped from Belize, I believe that favorable, long-term contracts could be secured.

Marketing & Sales

The primary market for Specialty Crops produced in Belize is the export market, with limited potential demand from Belize's hospitality industry, the latter currently supplied for the most part from imports. Belize's indigenous consumption of vegetables suited for the export market is limited for both cultural and economic reasons (e.g. Belizeans have more of a traditional "rice and beans" diet). The major export markets for specialty crops would be the US and Caribbean Community ([CARICOM](#)). There is no established Specialty Crops brokerage or distribution network within Belize, either for the domestic or the export market.

US demand would be seasonal, with most activity expected to focus on the December to March delivery window when US production is limited. CARICOM demand is expected to be year round, driven in part by the extensive hospitality industry present in many CARICOM countries,

as well as by certain more affluent socio-economic segments in the larger and more prosperous CARICOM countries. Exports from Belize would benefit from the Common External Tariff (CET) which is currently fixed at 40% for agricultural products, and the requirement for CARICOM importers to post their requirements with the CARICOM General Secretariat.

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