

## Bananas by the billions come to Philadelphia region's ports

Inquirer (3.16.2012) by Linda Loyd

([http://www.philly.com/philly/business/20120316\\_Bananas\\_by\\_the\\_billions\\_come\\_to\\_Philadelphia-region\\_s\\_ports.html](http://www.philly.com/philly/business/20120316_Bananas_by_the_billions_come_to_Philadelphia-region_s_ports.html))

Next time you peel a banana, there's an excellent chance it will have slipped here through a port on the Delaware River.

Billions of bananas arrive through the piers and terminals on the Delaware headed to grocers, wholesalers, and produce markets across the country.

Wilmington is the largest banana port in North America, and is second only to Antwerp, Belgium, in banana cargoes in the world.

Dole Fresh Fruit Co. brings one ship a week, carrying more than 65 million bananas into the Christina River in Wilmington, or more than three billion bananas a year, said Dole vice president for operations Stuart Jablon.

Chiquita Brands International Inc. sails a ship weekly into Wilmington, loaded with several hundred containers of bananas, along with pineapples and plantains.

The entire Delaware River is a sweet spot for bananas and tropical fruits from Colombia, Honduras, Costa Rica, Panama, and Ecuador.

Del Monte Fresh Produce N.A. Inc. delivers 43 million bananas a week, or about 2.2 billion a year, into Gloucester Terminals L.L.C. in New Jersey, according to Del Monte spokesman Dennis Christou.

Turbana Corp. brings 800 million bananas annually into Pier 82 in South Philadelphia, and Banacol S.A. transports 260,000 tons of bananas a year into Penn Terminals in Chester.

Turbana moved its fruit import business from Bridgeport, Conn., to Philadelphia in



Bananas are checked for temperature as they leave Wilmington, the world's second-largest banana port. Dole Fresh Fruit Co.

April 2009 "because here is more mainstream, with better road access, and truck availability," said Turbana CEO Juan Alarcon.

"We were looking for more efficiency and to be closer to our customers," he said. "The service that we get here is amazing. The labor is fantastic. And also we have a very good service provider, Penn Warehousing & Distribution."

The Wilmington port last year handled 1.4 million tons of tropical fruit, mostly bananas, said deputy executive port director Thomas Keefer.

Only Antwerp, with one of the largest sea-ports in Europe, handled more: 1.75 million tons in 2010.

Why does so much fruit come here?

"They are niche ports, so they are smaller ports," said Jablon, based in Wilmington with Dole. "Banana companies need to get their ships in and out quickly, so any port

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that has congestion is going to create havoc for our schedules. Remember, we are dealing with perishable produce."

Forty years ago, Chiquita and Dole berthed ships in New York but left because "it got very expensive and congested. We migrated down to Wilmington in the early 1980s," Jablon said.

The region is well-suited for the fruit industry - not too far north for ships bringing fresh fruit from the Tropics to make a weekly delivery.

"You could turn the ships in Richmond, Va., or Norfolk, but since most of our customer base is in the Northeast, you'd spend a lot of money trucking the fruit up here," Jablon said.

The region's ports have extensive on-dock refrigerated warehouses and a network of inland cold-storage facilities accessible to shippers. In addition, longshoremen have the training and equipment to handle large quantities of perishable produce.

"Over the years, the infrastructure has been built up," said John Brennan, president of Penn Terminals in Chester, where Banacol brings a ship once a week, loaded with 5,000 tons of bananas, some pineapples and plantains.

"Not only are there a lot of refrigerated warehouses here, but also refrigerated trucks to get the fruit from the port to all the host of supermarkets and little retail shops where it is sold," Brennan said. "All the infrastructure is here, so it's a competitive advantage for the Delaware River area."

Fresh fruit accounts for about 25 percent of ship cargoes coming into the Delaware River.

The region includes companies in the cold-storage business. In nearby Kennett Square, there is temperature-controlled storage traditionally geared to the mushroom industry. In Vineland, Hammonton, and Glassboro, companies have sprung up, catering to tomato, peach, and blueberry growers.

"The Delaware River receives by far the most tropical fruit of any estuary in the world," said Leo Holt, whose family owns Holt Logistics Corp. and the Gloucester Terminals.

The ports are "the most efficient gateway into the East Coast and into the hinterlands of the United States," said Holt. "You have a terrific transportation infrastructure, a terrific workforce up and down the river. You have a good consuming population, and 130-some million people within a 24-hour drive of Philadelphia."