

Weather, labour: Twin challenges for citrus growers

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IN THE PICTURE: As the Navel orange season begins here, new technology called Spectre, an app to record fruit size in a picking bin, will help with crop assessment. The app is demonstrated here by Lee Jobson from First Fresh, while Candice Pardy from Jobloads empties her picking bag. Pictures by Paul Rickard

GISBORNE citrus growers, like many other horticultural croppers in the district, have been up against it in a season described as “frustratingly challenging” by First Fresh managing director Ian Albers.

The citrus marketing company boss said two key elements have undoubtedly been the weather and labour.

“We have had too much of one and not enough of the other, and that against a backdrop of increasing costs, fluctuating demand and supply chain disruptions on some trade lanes, makes this one of the most challenging seasons I can remember.

“However, it hasn't been all doom and gloom,” Mr Albers said.

“The wet but mild autumn and winter certainly saw fruit size at the large end of the scale and for mandarins and oranges larger fruit is preferred by most consumers.”

The Satsuma mandarin season got under way in late April and has just started to taper now.

“Fruit size has been excellent and the taste has also been pretty good,” Mr Albers said.

“Prolonged wet weather can play havoc with fruit-keeping quality and Satsumas were challenged in this regard.

“Growers have had to be extra vigilant in their orchard management but often times it's been too wet to get on to their orchards to spray.”

Gisborne has traditionally been the Meyer lemon capital of New Zealand, with most of the national crop grown here.

“Cosmetically the fruit has been excellent this year. However, lemons are one crop where bigger is not necessarily better, especially for the export market where medium-sized lemons are preferred,” Mr Albers said.

“Largely, exporters were able to adapt and find creative ways to get this larger fruit offshore but the abundance of it certainly has seen the local market well supplied and consumers have enjoyed great buying on lemons.”

Lemons remain the country's main citrus export crop.

“Trade this year has been disrupted because of Covid with the strict lockdown in Shanghai curtailing trade to this market and the Ukraine war putting a hold on trade to Russia which, ironically, likes big fruit,” he said.

“Both the US and Japan, the largest markets for lemons, have generally been OK.

“Export shipping remains a challenge with disruptions to schedules and a shortage of equipment adding complexity to a service also impacted by large increases in cost.”

Meyer lemon harvesting has started to wind down and Yen Ben lemon volumes will peak soon.

“The New Zealand Navel orange season has been under way for a few weeks now and Gisborne Navel growers are starting to hit their stride as harvesting ramps up.

“Oranges grabbed the headlines a few weeks back when the market was bereft of fruit due to a supply gap caused by, you guessed it, shipping delays, but that is well and truly behind us now and New Zealand consumers are being treated to some excellent tasting fruit from Gisborne.

“Fruit matured early this year and with a robust industry-wide independent maturity testing regime in place consumers are well assured of a consistent eating experience.

“This is absolutely crucial when it comes to repeat sales and growers need New Zealand consumers buying Gisborne Navel oranges week in, week out through until at least mid-December.”

Meanwhile, First Fresh has been an early adopter of new technology out in the field.

It was the first company in the world to adapt this technology for citrus, working closely with the developer of the technology, New Zealand company Hectre. Called Spectre, the application allows the user to take a photo of a bin of harvested fruit.

“This photo is then uploaded and analysed using AI to give a prediction of the size distribution of the fruit in the bin,” Mr Albers said.

“This real-time feedback to growers is invaluable as it allows them to accurately monitor that they and their harvesting crews are picking the right sized fruit, leaving smaller fruit behind so it can be picked later when it is bigger and worth more.

“Then when it comes time to pack the fruit we have a great understanding of the size distribution of the fruit in the shed and can use that information to determine the order of packing to meet specific customer requirements in the most efficient way.

“The great thing about Spectre is that the more photos taken the better the accuracy and its ability to provide real-time information back to growers.”

Mr Albers said labour had been a real issue for the Gisborne horticultural sector this season.

“Jobloads is an innovative Gisborne labour services company that hires workers or ‘Jobstars’ on fixed term contracts and then matches them with any job assignments across a wide range of tasks and industries.

“Local woman Candice Parady first came up with the idea when she was running their own persimmon orchard and encountered the challenge of flexing up the workforce during the busy periods.

“She then won the Tairāwhiti Startup Weekend in 2019 and started developing Jobloads as an app,” Mr Albers said.

“Managing through Covid has been a challenge but now that things are starting to open up again the business is starting to take off.”

“We are starting to develop a great team of Jobstars who can be deployed across one or many jobs depending on a grower's requirements,” Candice Pardy said.

“Growers often need workers at short notice or in volume for short periods of time.

“Jobloads provides certainty for the grower that the job will get done,” she said.

“It also provides certainty for the employee that the business will find them their next job.”