

Will less be more for the coming export cherry season?

The effects of Covid-19 were, to a greater extent, not felt during the 2019-20 summerfruit season due to timing. As an industry we were lucky. Now we have a chance to plan for the 2020-21 season and hopefully avoid the worst of what will be an interesting period.

Logistics

No-one knows what the situation will be, come January 2021, but some of the best guess scenarios need to include the following.

- There is currently about 20% of the normal air freight capacity. More flights are returning and there is increasing interest in flights targeting freight.
- The prediction is for about 50% of last season's capacity, maybe.
- Christchurch capacity is more likely to be negatively affected than Auckland.
- Other air freight solutions need to be worked out as sea freight volumes are unlikely to make up for the loss of air freight.

Labour

Recently, on Radio New Zealand's National programme, an article featured both sides of the travel situation, those 'trapped' in New Zealand wanting to go home, as well as those wanting to get back into New Zealand. It's worth a listen – click [here](#).

Underscoring the labour situation, the industry needs to consider the following points.

- The 2020 harvest this year was small as a result of frost damage in Central Otago on 6 October. Even with this smaller than anticipated crop, getting enough workers to pick the crop was not easy
- The 2021 season has the potential to be our biggest crop ever, both in Hawke's Bay and Central Otago.
- The labour situation is confused especially with regards to the RSE supply. Backpacker numbers will be way down unless the Covid-19 situation changes dramatically. Will a vaccine be available to all in the short amount of time left until the start of the season?
- There will be Kiwis out of work, but we may need more than the inexperienced tourism and hospitality workers to make up for an RSE person with orchard experience and knowledge.
- Summerfruit NZ and HortNZ are working hard to support growers and packhouses by exploring the best options to meet the demand for labour.

Costs

Naturally everyone is extremely wary of how increased costs will affect the supply chain.

- Freight costs are likely to double, rumours are suggesting \$5.50 to over \$8 per kg.
- Effective labour costs could go up if we need to train more workers on the job.
- Competitive demand for pickers may alter the bucket and accommodation price.

New Zealand market

How much summerfruit can the New Zealand market absorb? We do have some experience from a few years ago with an oversupplied local market that saw low prices at retail in an attempt to move fruit that was not firm enough to export.

There was an additional negative price knock-on effect to apricots then peaches, nectarines and plums. That said, there could be a place for a different product of export quality fruit – both larger and firmer than we normally grow for domestic consumption. Are marketers aware of this potential and planning accordingly?

Trend monitoring

Situations change, weather changes, crop loads change. We are uncertain of many aspects but what we can do is monitor these critical changes. A short while ago the RSE situation was different to today, what will it be next week and then in a month's time? The cost for air freight is guessed at \$5.50+ per kg today, what will it be in a month or in three months?

We are starting this season with a possible biggest ever crop. What is winter chilling doing and what will spring temperatures deliver? Will there be adequate rainfall? Is it worth considering the use of dormancy breakers/enhancers to push around flowering and harvest times? Getting the gibberellic acid (GA) applications correct for firm fruit is worth a technical revisit as is botrytis control. Is this the year to do some resistance testing so that fruit that is exported doesn't have rots?

Large size fruit

Bigger and fewer fruit might be an answer that is worth considering, for both the export and domestic market from Central Otago. Fewer to pick and pack, less to freight and a larger return per kilogram.

Every cherry harvested should return good value to the grower.

As usual the quick Google search finds a nice easy article on this [here](#) from GoodFruit Grower.

In summary the points are:

1. Prune out small and pendant wood.
2. Keep the leaf to fruit ratio in balance.
3. Prune for light.
4. Ensure nutrients are correct, especially to drive good photosynthesis.
5. Irrigate when the crop needs it.

The obvious call at this part of the growing cycle is to prune harder but that should be tempered with; first we need to set a crop and then start adjusting the load to the desired level considering the trends that are being monitored.

Those 2, 3 and 4-year-old buds are the best producers and keeping a balanced tree is also critical to size and quality.

Nothing new here but always worth a repeat and rethink in light of Covid-19 fallout.

Final thoughts

Talking with all parties will give a clearer picture over time. If we can work together that will be helpful.

Make plan A, then make plan B and then plan C.

- Is this the time to be pulling that under-performing block?
- Which block will not be picked if labour or freight is not available?
- Is the cash flow such that some blocks are a lesser priority than others?
- Be clear about what the destination of each block is, domestic setup is normally different to an export crop setup.
- If sea freight is used the varieties selected will need to be the hard, long storage fruit.
- When will be the right time to stop spending on a block?

These comments are a summary of what a few people have been thinking about over the last few weeks. My thanks to Craig, Richard, Jeremy, Jerf and Grant, for their time and for sharing their thoughts with me and the summerfruit industry.

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