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\$11.5M effort to deliver bot-ready strawberries

Strawberries specially bred for automated picking will soon become a reality in Australia after the launch of an initiative to develop varieties that can be easily harvested by robot.

Scientists will naturally meld together the flavour, colour and aroma traits Aussies love the most with premium strawberry varieties from the world that feature single stemmed fruit ideal for robotic picking. The \$11.5M, four-year effort is being delivered through Hort Innovation and led by the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries Queensland (DAFQ).

Hort Innovation chief executive Brett Fifield said [recent data](#) shows the horticulture workforce has decreased by 20 per cent over the past three years, which has resulted in [40 per cent](#) of Australian growers adopting advanced machinery.

“The development of a sweet, rich red and aromatic strawberry that is ideal for automation will prove a game changer for growers who want to apply new technologies on-farm,” he said. “While harvesting strawberries using automation is not common practice yet in Australia, it will be before we know it.”

Mr Fifield said Hort Innovation is working with tech companies and researchers on various horticulture related automation projects, and scoping discussions with the berry industry to identify opportunities for technology adoption are underway.

Department of Agriculture and Fisheries Queensland principal plant breeder Dr Jodi Neal said the program will reduce the time needed to pick and pack strawberries, resulting in a more profitable outcome for growers.

“It takes the same amount of time to pick a small strawberry as it does to pick a large one,” Dr Neal said. “This breeding program is focusing on delivering a consistent fruit size that is preferred by consumers on unbranched flower stems – meaning that the fruit can be picked faster – either by conventional methods or through automation.”

Minister for Agricultural Industry Development and Fisheries Mark Furner said Queensland is a leader in agricultural innovation.

“Queensland remains on the cutting edge of AgTech, which will be vital to the future of agriculture and the thousands of good jobs it supports in our state,” Mr Furner said.

“I commend the great work of Hort Innovation and my department and look forward to seeing the fruits of this investment benefitting the industry for years to come.”

Berries Australia executive director Rachel Mackenzie said the nation’s strawberry growers are ready to reap the benefits of the program’s efforts to reduce the cost of harvesting.

“Breeding bespoke varieties to suit strawberry growers across the country is a priority for our industry,” she said. “We are looking forward to this program equipping us to profitably deliver consistent, high-quality fruit for Australians and the world.”

The Australian national strawberry industry has an estimated farm gate value of \$417 million (2021/22 [Australian Horticulture Statistics Handbook](#)). Varieties developed by the Australian Strawberry Breeding Program currently capture 45 per cent of the national market and 90 per cent of the subtropical industry. These varieties currently provide approximately 11,000 jobs in production alone in Australia and are estimated to have a farm gate value of approximately \$174 million last year.

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