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\$15M to safeguard produce quality amid supply-chain challenges

Australian horticulture growers have joined forces with state agencies in a \$15M bid to drive supply-chain efficiencies and strengthen their domestic and international trade offerings.

Being delivered through Hort Innovation and led by the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries (DAF) Queensland with financial and research support from various industry partners, the 3.5-year project will help growers manage supply chain risks and minimise produce loss.

Hort Innovation Chief Executive Brett Fifield said the project was spurred off the back of a desire to deliver quality produce to buyers every time in the face of supply chain disruptions associated with Covid-19.

“It’s no secret the past two years have been challenging with Covid hindering all stages of the supply chain from farm to retail,” he said. “What this project will do is draw on some of the best research talents in the country as well as the knowledge and networks of key industry partners to make the business of getting quality horticultural products to market, domestically and overseas, that little bit easier.”

Project work will focus on current and emerging export cultivars of avocado, mango, nectarine, peach, plum, strawberry and vegetables such as asparagus, broccoli, cauliflower, celery and lettuce. Research and extension specialists will develop and promote cultivar-specific decision aid tools, based on shelf life prediction models, that factor in regional variability, harvest maturity, postharvest treatments and cooling procedures across different modes of transport.

QLD Agriculture Minister Mark Furner said the decision-aid tools will draw on data from real-time consignment monitoring to inform handling strategies and commercial decisions when ideal supply chain conditions have not been met. This research will provide Australian horticulture producers with the skills, confidence and necessary decision support to identify, assess and manage current supply chain risks in the pursuit of delivering more predictable product quality” he said.

DAF has assembled an experienced national team, including research, technical and extension staff from Agriculture Victoria, the Northern Territory Department of Industry, Tourism and Trade and the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, Western Australia. The project has also attracted co-investment from leading mango grower and marketer Piñata Farms plus AUSVEG and Summerfruit Australia through an Agriculture Victoria grant as well as berry and avocado growers through levies.

AUSVEG chief executive Michael Coote said the project would provide valuable information for growers when minimising food waste and ensuring efficiencies in the supply chain have never been more critical.

“This project will deliver grower-friendly resources with clear, concise advice confirming pathways for vegetable crops to different markets,” he said. “It complements other vegetable export development initiatives and is an opportunity for growers to secure outcomes as part of a broader industry supply chain improvement approach.”

Northern Territory Department of Industry, Tourism and Trade spokesperson Muhammad Sohail Mazhar said the project would allow Australian producers to continue to deliver the quality fruit and vegetables that buyers expect. “Australia has a reputation for producing safe and nutritious premium fresh produce,” he said. “Consistently delivering high-quality fruit and vegetables is vital to productive trade relationships.”

Summerfruit Australia Chief Executive Trevor Ranford said the access to data would prove invaluable to producers. “This project will evaluate nectarine, peach and plum cultivar performance and determine their suitability to air and seafreight supply chains by considering environment, management and postharvest factors



that influence product quality,” Mr Ranford said. “This will deliver them a competitive edge when dealing with trade partners and support Australia’s already strong reputation for providing premium produce.”

Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, Western Australia Senior Research Scientist Dario Stefanelli said: “The research is very innovative. It will involve completing a series of time by temperature simulation trials and monitoring of commercial consignments to characterise fruit and vegetable quality responses and cultivar performance.”

Piñata Farms Managing Director Gavin Scurr welcomed the project and said he looked forward to participating in trials: “This is a good opportunity to gain greater knowledge of the impacts of different production environments and handling practices on ‘Honey Gold’ mango fruit quality and shelf life,” he said. “The shelf life modelling will potentially allow us to predict the saleable life for each fruit and tailor marketing to move away from the generic first-in, first-out system.”

This project is being delivered through Hort Innovation’s Hort Frontiers strategic partnership initiative. Hort Frontiers facilitates collaborative, transformation research and development to support horticulture to 2030, and beyond.

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