

## **Final Report**

# **World Potato Congress and European potato conference study tours**

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**Project code:**

PT18002

**Project:**

World Potato Congress and European potato conference study tours (PT18002)

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**Funding statement:**

This project has been funded by Hort Innovation, using the potato – fresh and potato - processing research and development levy and contributions from the Australian Government. Hort Innovation is the grower-owned, not-for-profit research and development corporation for Australian horticulture.

**Publishing details:**

ISBN 978-0-7341-4688-5

Published and distributed by: Hort Innovation

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[www.horticulture.com.au](http://www.horticulture.com.au)

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## Summary

The Project PT18002 *European Potato Conference Study Tour* was to facilitate four international study tours for the fresh and processing potato industries between 2019 and 2021, providing the opportunity for levy payers and industry researchers to travel overseas to learn and engage with international experts and peers. The specific tours planned under this project included the PotatoEurope exhibition in September 2019 (Belgium), 2020 (France) and 2021 (the Netherlands), and the World Potato Congress 2021, held in Ireland across late May and early June 2021.

It was hoped that attendance at these events would result in increasing knowledge and awareness of global research, practices and innovations, and supporting the adoption of the latest practices and technologies in Australia.

Due to COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts on international travel the project activities were suspended in early 2020 and a decision was made to prematurely terminate the project in early 2021.

However attendance at one international event was achieved, The 2019 European Potato Conference Study Tour and this now forms the sole output of PT18002.

## Public summary

The 2019 European Potato Conference Study Tour (PT18002) provided the opportunity for a group of five Australian potato growers and agronomists to visit innovative growing operations, research facilities, agribusinesses and PotatoEurope.

From 1-7 September 2019, the group travelled to Belgium and Northern France to visit a number of sites and organisations focused on innovation in potato production. The six-day tour, led by AUSVEG, focused on the two-day exhibition, PotatoEurope, which was held in Kain near Tournai. The group included representatives from all facets of the Australian potato industry, including seed, ware and processing.

The one-week tour began in Brussels, Belgium, where the group converged on the first day of the tour after flying in from all around Australia. On the second day, the group travelled south to Gembloux in the French-speaking Walloon region, visiting a number of potato growers. Basing themselves in Lille, France, the group travelled north to Kruishoutem in the Dutch-speaking Flemish region for the third day of the tour. The group visited research facilities and a factory producing potato harvesters. Day four and five were spent at PotatoEurope and the sixth day was devoted to visiting growers and agronomists in the Gosselies and Berloz areas of Belgium, before returning to Brussels to fly home the following day.

Following their return to Australia, participants shared their new-found knowledge with friends and colleagues to disseminate the key insights discovered from the tour to the wider Australian potato growing community. Coverage of the tour appeared in the October edition of *Potatoes Australia*, as well as AUSVEG's Weekly Update e-newsletter and social media channels.

The tour allowed participants to experience the large scale of potato production in Belgium, providing a clearer insight into industry nuances, production practices, new technologies and issues facing growers in those countries. Most importantly, participants were able to expand their local and international networks and broaden their knowledge and understanding of potato production and its associated industries. Upon their return to Australia, attendees planned to review the strategic direction of their businesses and incorporate new ideas and technologies into their growing operations.

Monitoring and evaluation was conducted through written evaluations that were completed by participants to provide a record of each day's events and ensure information was retained, while debriefing sessions were held throughout the tour to discuss key points of interest.

## Keywords

Industry Leadership and Development; potato industry; PotatoEurope; Belgium; conference; fresh potato; potato processing; seed potato; networking; grower tour; new technology; potato research; AUSVEG; Hort Innovation.

## Introduction

For many years, Australia's potato growers have benefited from the opportunity to attend international grower tours to key potato production regions around the world. These tours have successfully allowed participants to be exposed to the global horticulture industry and meet their peers in different countries to discuss similar challenges and practices, as well as those specific to the regions where they visited.

The ability to temporarily step away from Australian potato production and gain a new perspective on the industry has helped to foster innovation in the Australian potato industry, as participants have brought back new knowledge and practices to improve the efficiency and profitability of their operations. Upon their return, participants have also shared their findings with their networks and through industry communications, allowing the wider Australian potato industry to benefit from the tour.

The importance of developing the skills and knowledge of the industry's members was a key objective for the 2019 European Potato Conference Study Tour. Belgium was the primary location of the tour as it is one of the four large potato producing countries of Europe and the host country for 2019 PotatoEurope. The tour provided an opportunity for Australian potato growers and agronomists to learn from their international peers and forge long-lasting networks with growers and agribusinesses in Belgium and Europe, more generally. It also allowed them to gain a fresh insight into new production practices, machinery, technologies and strategies that are currently being used to advance potato production in Europe.

To ensure participants received the greatest benefit from the tour, the itinerary included visits to two key potato-growing regions in Belgium. Meetings were also organised with growers, researchers and agribusinesses to ensure a diverse range of topics was discussed throughout the tour. This included on-farm production practices and innovations, a packing house, value-adding through processing at a farm level, contractors providing advanced harvesting services and potato seed protection and production.

Regular debriefings were held throughout the tour to discuss the key insights and highlights from the meetings undertaken. Participants were encouraged to take notes of meetings and completed an evaluation form to provide feedback on the success of the tour.

The 2019 European Potato Conference Study Tour is a strategic levy investment under the Hort Innovation Fresh Potato and Potato Processing Funds.

## Methodology

A detailed itinerary was provided to the 2019 European Potato Conference Study Tour participants prior to their departure, as well as a hard copy booklet including the tour's itinerary and participant contact details. Below is a detailed summary of the events and activities that took place during the tour.

### Day 1: Sunday 1 September 2019

#### *Travel Day*

Participants travelled individually from Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth to meet up in Doha. After some transit time, in which the group began to get to know each other, they boarded the flight to Brussels. Once in Brussels, there was time to unpack and go out for a meal of Moules-frites (mussels and fries), where the group got to know each other. Topics discussed focused on the flight, Brussels and Tomato-potato psyllid.

### Day 2: Monday 2 September 2019

On the second day of the tour, the group travelled south in a minibus to Gembloux in the French-speaking Walloon region, where it was joined by Daniel Ryckmans, an agronomist employed by the Walloon Potato Growers' Association (Filliere Wallonne de le Pomme de Terre; FIWAP).

There, participants visited a seed potato cooperative, Condi Plants, which has seven grower members, produces around 200 hectares of seed potatoes per season, and shares common storage and seed grading facilities. The cooperative has a holistic approach to seed production, where they grow, store, harvest transport, pack and market their product. Much of their seed is exported around the world and the grower visitors were impressed with the infrastructure and machinery in use.

The cooperative takes a different approach to what is done in Australia, where seed growing is an individual grower responsibility. The seven growers in the cooperative have farm sizes between 100 and 250ha and grow fifteen different varieties. Potato production in this area is very different from Australia, paddocks are very small, and a grower may have up to 90 paddocks spread over a 30km area. Consequently, potatoes are constantly being harvested throughout the visit and arrive in tipper trailers for sorting and storage. The site stores around 10,000t of potatoes, which are then exported to counties around the world, predominately developing countries.

Certification is compulsory in Belgium and samples of all seed is grown out for testing for disease and cutting of seed is forbidden. Pests and disease issues of particular importance to the cooperative were Colorado potato beetle, Potato virus Y, Blackleg and Potato cyst nematode. The group was interested to hear that their seed sells for up to €1200 per tonne, while the ware and processing potatoes that result from it go for €160-180 per tonne.

After a typical lunch of frites (fries), the group then met with experienced potato growers Lieven and Stefan Holvoet and were fortunate to receive a tour of the Holvoet brothers' property. As with the previous growing area, the group saw the very large number of small potato paddocks (by Australian standards) spread throughout the area they farm. The Holvoet brothers grow on 250ha of land with an average paddock size of 4.5ha on a potato rotation of five years. Their paddocks and those of their neighbours go right up to the very edge of the village and the highway, and, as the group inspected the crop, they could see over a dozen small paddocks surrounding them, each owned by different growers.

The brothers have crops up to 50km away from their storage sheds, which are advanced concrete air-floor storage facilities that are capable of stacking potatoes up to 6m high. Because of these distances, a vast amount of high-quality machinery is being used. They have seven advanced trailer units constantly on the road, which can be loaded while the harvester is still harvesting and takes 12 minutes to unload at the sheds. There is a three-week harvest window in Belgium, and the brothers can harvest up to 1000 tonnes a day during peak period. Equipment is upgraded every four years.

It was eye-opening to see the effects of the two-year drought that the majority of Europe has experienced, along with the impact that Colorado potato beetle, a pest not yet found in Australia, has had on their crop. This year they only got 27t/ha because of the lack of water and feeding damage. They were contracted to produce 39t/ha and, unlike in Australia, were required to pay the processor for the shortfall.

Along with Colorado potato beetle, pests and disease issues included significant levels of common scab. They use a

monitoring system for Late blight, which there are many highly destructive genotypes in Europe, unlike in Australia. Interestingly for the group, the brothers do not seem to have much of an issue with aphids, although they are monitored for, the brothers have not sprayed for them in 10 years. Under European labeling laws, monitoring evidence needs to be collected in order for insecticide usage to be allowed.

Following the farm visit, the group was driven two hours to Lille, France, where they settled into the hotel in the old part of the city which would be their base of operations for the rest of the trip.

### Day 3: Tuesday 3 September 2019

On the third day, the group travelled north to Kruishoutem in the Dutch-speaking Flemish region. The first stop was a visit to Interprovinciaal Proefcentrum voor de Aardappelteelt vzw (PCA), which is an association for independent practical research and information on potato cultivation. In close collaboration with the potatoes research group of Inagro, the PCA offers a wide range of services and advice for growers and other potato industry stakeholders. In their modern research facility, the group met with Dr Pieter Vanhaverbeke, a world expert on Potato late blight. He presented on the late blight warning system, along with a parallel Early blight warning system, which use weather data and a broad range of data inputs to provide predictive models of risk that are individually tailored to each grower in the region. The former system has been in operation for 25 years, while that latter has been for six years. Over the many years that it has been in operation, the predictions have been refined to be highly accurate.

Dr Vanhaverbeke stated that it only took around three years of being in the program for growers to begin to change their practices based on the outputs from the modeling system. Highly detailed weather data from a large number of weather stations in the region, combined with records of previous seasons infection timing, informs the model. This is combined with plant growth stage data and previous control measures taken by the growers. The models then account for all of these variables and produces an overall risk profile individually tailored to each of the growers in the system.

These models are then used by these growers to manage the risk of crop infection and to justify the use of preventive fungicides, which is regulated in the European Union. Growers and agronomists must provide evidence to prove that a spray application is necessary. The program is run by eight research staff and has 1,000 grower members who each pay €100 per year to access the data. The group was amazed to see that the entire system only cost around €400,000 per year to operate and pleased to see that there was a real effort amongst growers and researchers to share knowledge and work together on common disease problems. Potato crop production in the Northern Flemish region, where the system operates has increased from an average of 60t/ha to 80t/ha in the past 10 years.

Although Early blight, *Alternaria solani*, is an issue for potato growers in Belgium, it is the Late blight pathogen *Phytophthora infestans*, which is the major problem in Europe for potato growers. This pathogen has many genotype populations (around 44 have been identified), each characterised by various levels of aggressiveness and fungicide resistance. In Europe, only around 10 are abundant at any point in time, but these change in predominance depending on weather conditions. None of these exotic populations are yet present in Australia, so the group was very interested in the management approaches taken in Belgium and were impressed by the predictive services provided by PCA. The various species and sub-species of bacteria that cause Blackleg in potatoes was also discussed. Europe has a number of these that Australia does not currently have or have only recently arrived, and the growers were keen to hear about the best management practices that are used in Europe to combat these significantly destructive pathogens.

Following lunch, the group spent the rest of the day at the Dewulf potato harvester factory in nearby Roeselare, Belgium. The group viewed two and four row self-propelled harvesters in various stages of construction, along with a range of other powered and unpowered machinery. The factory employs approximately 300 staff and builds around 20 of the company's flagship product, the self-propelled four row harvester. The site also builds a range of tractor-drawn harvesters for both carrots and potatoes. It provided the group with an excellent background to then see the finished product in action the next day.

### Days 4 & 5: Wednesday 3 and Thursday 4 September 2019

Days four and five were spent at PotatoEurope, which is an outdoor and covered event that takes place annually in one of the four main potato-growing countries across Europe in a four-year cycle. After France, the Netherlands



and Germany, it was Belgium's turn this year, where it was held on a farm near Kain in south-east Belgium. Apart from sporadic rain showers, the weather was perfect, sunny and warm, giving everyone a chance to spend the days wandering around between exhibits.

The event brought together representatives from the entire potato supply chain to consult with experts in the field of cultivation, materials and potato processing. This year, the event attracted 10,683 people from 40 countries involved in potato production, which is a significant increase from previous years. There were 225 exhibitors from 17 countries in attendance that were showcasing the latest potato products and services. An important and appealing component of PotatoEurope – that differentiates it from other events – is the practical demonstration of machinery.

This year, there were 14 machines harvesting 20 hectares of potatoes, pulling up a healthy 50t/ha from the site, in an area that was experiencing its second season of drought. Both towed and self-propelled, two and four row, harvesters from all the major brands would harvest strip of potatoes in the surrounding paddocks around the exhibition site throughout the day. Members of the group all got to ride on the machines, seeing the digging and sorting running in real-world conditions. Many other types of machinery vital to potato growing, such as graders, were also on display and in operation.

The minibus would pick up the group from the hotel in Lille and drive them the 30 minutes each day it took to get to the site. Each member of the tour was able to focus their time and attention on what they were most interested in, meeting back at lunch time, and then going off again until the end of the day. Each night, the day would be discussed over dinner with feedback being highly positive, and participants wished that there was something similarly potato-focused back home in Australia.

The range of displays really impressed the group. Along with harvesters, all other parts of the potato production and supply chain were represented. This included representatives from potato breeding, including minituber production, a large SASA exhibit, which provides many of the varieties that are brought into Australia, and a planted display of the very wide range of the potato breeds available in Europe and across the world. Planting technology, storage innovations and a number of optical sorters were also on display.

#### **Day 6: Thursday 6 September 2019**

Rounding out the tour on the sixth day, was a meeting with Grimme representatives Paul Menz and Alex Stärk, who travelled with participants to two potato growing operations. As a result, the group was able to see Varitron 470 harvesters in action.

The first stop was a family farm of 330 hectares in Gosselies, Belgium, where they grow and process fresh market and French fry potatoes, some of which are sold and delivered directly to restaurants throughout the region. Many in the group found it inspirational that this family business was able to produce potatoes across the value chain. They were sorting, washing, cutting and packing French fries. They were then kept in refrigerated storage and delivered to customers around the areas in their own fleet of trucks. The group were made to feel welcome by the family and were invited in for coffee and tea and a chance to talk with them about their business. They also joined the group for a quick lunch of frites before moving onto the next farm.

The second site was a contacting operation run by two brothers and a son in Berloz, Belgium. The visitors were impressed by the scale of the operation, which was harvesting approximately 1,200 hectares of potatoes while relying on only small number of staff. The brothers were harvesting a large paddock at the time of the visit, so the group was able to ride along on the harvester and experience the harvest in conditions that more closely matched the conditions typically seen in Australia. The group then visited the company's base of operations, where they got to see more high-end machinery and the storage sheds, where bins are stacked seven high. In each location, the group was treated to fantastic grower hospitality where all aspects of the business were freely discussed. Following this visit, the group got on the bus for the two-hour return trip back to Brussels.

#### **Day 7: Thursday 6 September 2019**

##### *Travel Day*

After breakfast, the group said goodbye to each other and headed off to the airport for their flights back to Australia.

## Outputs

Since the completion of the tour, AUSVEG has encouraged participants to share information on what they have learnt and experienced with their colleagues and peers throughout their industry networks, as well as ensuring they participate in future industry events, workshops and seminars. Participants have also remained in contact with each other since the conclusion of the tour, where they have continued the discussion on their new-found insights into potato production practices. The WhatsApp group set up for the tour has been particularly useful in allowing the tour group members to stay in contact and share their work and practice changes with the others.

Following the conclusion of the tour, AUSVEG published an article on the tour in the October 2019 edition of [Potatoes Australia](#), titled 'Aussie growers and processors get a taste of the European potato industry'.

Where the opportunity arises, participants will continue to be invited to share their experiences at industry seminars arranged, organised, facilitated and/or communicated by AUSVEG and other potato industry organisations. The contact details and relationships built throughout the tour will also be used to facilitate future discussions and continue the process of sharing information.

## Outcomes

The 2019 European Potato Conference Study Tour provided five Australian potato growers and agronomists with exposure to the latest in potato production practices and technologies employed by their international counterparts in Europe and from around the world. The tour inspired participants to review the strategic direction of their businesses and investigate improvements in their current potato growing operations, while simultaneously identifying new ideas and technologies for implementation in Australia. For these industry people, the trip facilitated the opportunity for participants to learn skills and knowledge to broaden their farm management capabilities and provided them with more confidence to take up new technologies and play a direct role in advancing the future of the Australian potato industry.

Knowledge was obtained by visiting a range of potato growing operations, research facilities and agribusinesses across Belgium. The diverse range of meetings held during the trip provided insights into new and unique business practices that could be implemented in Australia, and inspired participants to further research these opportunities upon their return.

Some key findings included the potential of pests and disease forecasting. Along with the insights provided by Dr Pieter Vanhaverbeke and his team at PCA, there were many products and displays of smart trapping and forecasting technologies on display at PotatoEurope. One key impression that the group got from their visit is the willingness of the European potato industry to share pests and disease data and work closely with the research community. With the recent advances in trapping and prediction technology and software, a joint approach to pests and disease management may be able to be applied in Australia. The value placed on such systems by the Flemish industry is quite clear and the yield increases resulting from it are plain to see.

The group was interested in the labour, time and costs saving that may be gained out of adopting new harvesting and packing technologies that were on display. Advancements in potato handling technologies and the cost to benefit comparisons with older technology made a strong impression on the group. It is likely that the lessons learned on this trip will lead to new technology purchases and the changing in some handling and sorting practices in a number of growing operations.

During the trip, many participants came across innovative ways to value-add, particularly the growing operation that was also supplying French fries to local businesses. With margins declining for many potato growers, adding value to production can help producers remain profitable as a business. Also, the supermarkets and fresh food retail stores that the group visited in Lille and Brussels once the day's activities had finished highlighted the creativity of some European growers in designing packaging that is highly appealing to the consumer and meets a unique consumer need. Some of these products were borne purely out of consumer demand, which reinforces that Australian potato growers have an opportunity to look more closely at what the consumer desires, especially when it comes to convenience.

Importantly, the tour also allowed participants to expand their local and international business networks and discuss mutual areas of interest. The group consisted of a diverse range of participants representing potato growers and agronomists from across multiple Australian states and they each held a different role within their respective businesses, from business owners with whole-of-farm responsibility, agronomist serving a wide number of farms, farm managers and people with transport and product development responsibilities. This allowed participants to share and discuss their diverse range of knowledge and experience and ultimately learn from each other over the week-long trip.

The group met many influential growers in Belgium, especially at PotatoEurope, where attendees were from all over Europe. As a result, they were able to forge key contacts. While the technicalities of potato production may differ from country to country, many of the overarching challenges and issues – including labour, water access, sustainability, profitability and increasing potato consumption – remain the same. The participants relished the opportunity to discuss common issues with international growers and find out the strategies they have implemented to overcome these challenges, and how they could improve areas of their own farms. The participants were very appreciative of the time that these growers dedicated to the visit, their hospitality and transparency in discussing challenges and solutions within their growing operation.

Providing networking opportunities for Australian growers is essential to ensuring that the Australian potato industry can prosper into the future. Many participants noted that their attendance on the trip allowed them access to many farms and businesses that they would be unlikely to see on an individual level. It allowed participants to gain a stronger understanding of how the potato industry is progressing and how consumer

demand is being acknowledged and met.

The participants will continue to share their acquired knowledge of European potato production processes and developments with their colleagues in the Australian industry. Some participants were also required to present findings back to their company upon their return.

Finally, it is important that participants remain in contact with each other as well as their international counterparts. Creating strong and long-lasting business relationships will result in valuable information being shared among Australian potato growers for the benefit of the industry as a whole – this is particularly important for the younger growers as the networks they forge as they start in the industry will stand them in good stead for the decades to come. Similarly, the WhatsApp group continues to thrive with group members sharing many insights and practices with each other.

As a result of levy investment, participants gained a better understanding of the ways they can improve on-farm practices and develop their skills and were inspired with new innovations and ideas to advance and grow the potato industry.

## Monitoring and evaluation

For monitoring and evaluation purposes, participants were required to share their feedback on the tour during six group dinners. Discussions were also held sporadically throughout the tour.

At the end of the tour, participants completed an evaluation form, which reflected their experiences and the value they received from taking part in the tour. The below quotes provide an overview of the feedback received and have been extracted from the evaluation forms.

### Comments

- “Great opportunity to see the potato industry outside of Australia and learn and see things which we can bring back to our businesses and the local industry in general.”
- “The visit to PCA was very interesting – to learn about their Late blight warning systems, and more about processes and protocols farmers there have to abide by as part of the EU gave some insights as to what we may have to prepare for in the future.”
- “The visit to the DeWulf factory was very interesting. Allowed for us to see machines being built – not something you get to see normally.”
- “There is no opportunity to ever see and learn about all things potato in Australia like there was at this event [PotatoEurope]. Seed, machinery, potato infrastructure and packing equipment all in the one place – and a lot more range than we ever normally see.”
- “A great networking event where we can meet potato people from all over the world.”
- “This trip is not something I could have done without it being an organised trip by AUSVEG, using their contacts and those from within the group.”
- “A fantastic trip and opportunity which I am very thankful for. The whole trip went very smoothly and was very well organized ... Sincere appreciation to Callum and AUSVEG for a great tour.”
- “Visiting the Condi-Plant seed potato co-operative was really good to see how they get a co-op to operate there, and also the machinery and infrastructure they use and how it compared to Australia.”
- “Basically potato heaven for any potato producer.”

## Recommendations

Based on feedback from participants and observations made during the tour and the beneficial outcomes of the tour participants, it is recommended to continue the delivery of PT18002 *European Potato Conference Study Tour*. The following recommendations are also provided.

- The itineraries for future tours could include a visit to a large packing shed, where they pack for the fresh market and a visit to the market auctions.
- Make the tour a couple of days longer with a rest day in the middle.

The evaluation form also included a prompt for ideas/technology that would be suitable to submit as a concept to Hort Innovation to be reviewed by the Fresh and Processing Strategic Investment Advisory Panel. Participants' suggestions are outlined below:

- Further research and planning/preparation as to pending threats to our industry – i.e. Pests and diseases which exist in the EU and other countries but are not in Australia yet, or only in isolated cases.
- Industry bringing in and trialing new varieties, as a whole. Smaller growers don't get exposure to these varieties as only the larger businesses can afford to look at them.
- Late blight/Alternaria/psyllid/aphid warning and trapping to inform farmers on a national scale.

## Refereed scientific publications

None to report.

## References

None to report.

## **Intellectual property, commercialisation and confidentiality**

No project IP, project outputs, commercialisation or confidentiality issues to report.



## Acknowledgements

The European Potato Conference Study Tour was funded by Hort Innovation using the Fresh and Processed research and development levies, contributions from Australian potato growing businesses and contributions from the Australian Government.

The tour, including travel, accommodation and meetings, were organised by AUSVEG.

Thanks must go to all those who gave their valuable time to meet with the delegation, as well as Kurt Cornelissen and Dr Pieter Vanhaverbeke from PCA, Rob Breedveld, Alexander Stärk and Paul Menz from Grimme, without which the tour would have been far less beneficial.

## Appendices

### Study Tour participants

2019 European Potato Conference Study Tour	
Name	Location
Matt Steendam	Victoria
Alan Parker	Western Australia
Phillip Gorman	South Australia
Olivia Ryan	Victoria
Angus Galloway	Tasmania
Callum Fletcher	Victoria (Tour Leader)