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Horticulture Impact Assessment Program

TG19004 – Minimum maturity standards adoption across the table grape supply chain – Case study

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Hort Innovation

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TG19004 Minimum maturity standards adoption across the table grape supply chain

David Welfare

Table 1 TG19004

Stakeholder	David Welfare - Executive Manager Quality Assurance
Business	Aldi

What was the project about?

Previous investments by Hort Innovation in the table grape industry has identified a need for a Minimum Maturity Standards (MMS) to be adopted across the industry.

TG19004: Minimum Maturity Standards Adoption Across the Table Grape Supply Chain was implemented to support the achievement of widespread MMS adoption across the industry, from growers to retailers, to ensure high and consistent table grape quality. Specifically, the project aimed to:

- Drive accountability across all key stakeholders (growers, wholesalers, major supermarkets) to ensure that the new MMS are fully implemented and adopted, resulting in greater consumer acceptability.
- Undertake quality testing (in retailer stores) and to measure impact of change with the launch and adoption of the new MMS across the value chain.
- Continue to drive best-practice across the supply chain from growers to retail through education and engagement mechanisms and drive a positive culture focused on high quality standards for Australian table grapes.

David's involvement in adopting the MMS

David was involved in Table Grapes MMS since 2014. He provided data on table grape maturity from Aldi distribution centres to the project group as part of the monitoring activities of table grape maturity. Additionally, he provided recommendations on how to improve the project, liaised with the project team and stakeholders, as well as with other retailers to ensure that immature table grapes are not getting onto supermarket shelves.

What benefits have you seen because of the project, particularly in improvement of grape quality?

Both anecdotal evidence and consumer reports show that the project has achieved getting sweeter grapes to the retail shelves. David said:

"Customers get a good eating experience every time they go, rather than that swing of sometimes they're not great, sometimes they're great and that's all about providing the confidence in them to support a repeat purchase of the product. The goal is to have the MMS at an industry agreed level."

This project has allowed a focus on whether improvements need to be made at a grower level, a market level

or a retailer level.

"It puts a spotlight on what we should be doing to support everyone across the supply chain."

Why was the project important to retailers, customers and industry?

"The key part is getting customers to participate in eating grapes and when they do, be confident that the next time, they will have as good an eating experience as they just did."

Since Brix content[1] and variability are the key variables for driving repeat purchase and increasing consumer satisfaction, the project played an important role in maintaining these standards so that all parties, from growers to retailers and consumers, are benefitted.

What were the challenges in adopting the MMS?

David shared that one of the key challenges in adopting the MMS was getting the grower base to accept that there was a problem around some of the immature fruit hitting the market and getting the grower base to understand what the benefits would be of an MMS.

Another challenge was finding a way to effectively control the immature fruit hitting the market and providing feedback to those parties that needed support to achieve the minimum maturity standards.

On-farm testing typically is designed to provide a broad indication when the season may be ready to commence, as there are many on-farm variables that affect maturity, such as slope aspect, soil type, irrigation, plant foliage density, fruit load, agronomic practices. This means on-farm maturity monitoring is not an accurate way to judge the consumer experience. Once harvested, poor quality fruit, even though it may be rejected by a major retailer, will still ultimately reach (and dissatisfy) consumers via central markets. Therefore, the support from retailers has been critical to ensure the success of the project.

Is there a part of the project that could have been improved?

David shared that the monitoring of MMS in table grapes is important to the whole industry and to consumers.

It is not only the retailer's responsibility to ensure that the MMS is being met, but also the grower. However, retailers are the last line of defence to ensure that quality grapes are getting into the hands of consumers. This is important because the retailer decides whether they accept or reject the stock based on that maturity standard, which has a flow on effect for their customers. Assessing the MMS is a time-consuming task for retailers.

Do you have any final recommendations or thoughts?

The project was well received across the industry and the supply chain. It demonstrated how MMS could be successfully implemented to benefit growers, retailers and customers alike. This resulted in other industries looking to implement MMS in their own supply chain, such as the melon industry.

[1] Brix is a measure of the concentration of sugar in a solution, usually expressed as a percentage by weight (grams of sugar per 100 grams of solution). It's a common measurement in the food and beverage industry to determine sweetness, ripeness, and quality, especially in fruits and fruit products.