

CUTTING Edge

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Food Safety and Quality Marks Welcome to the Future



The Cutting Edge is a regular article written by Dr Jonathan Cutting for the New Zealand avocado industry magazine, AvoScene.

The more things change – the more they stay the same. Recently, when I attended the South African Avocado Growers Association Research conference and AGM, I couldn't help but smile. The only item on the AGM agenda under Other Business was – wait for it – early season immature fruit on the domestic market causing problems. One grower in particular was most excited and agitated as he pleaded with growers at the AGM to find solutions to the industry “cowboys” and skelems” (local speak for rascals.)

This again had me thinking about finding an enduring solution that growers can find acceptable and agree to implement. This is not a problem that is unique to other countries – it is an enduring New Zealand avocado industry problem and an issue that raises its head each June July period and then again annually at the AGM. What can the AGA do about it?

In terms of compliance (and without invoking legislated domestic market grade standards) the AGA can do very little. In countless AGA Board meetings the AGA representatives have always been reluctant to progress down the path of legislated domestic market standards as there is a firm belief that this will constrain the industry and ensure that it is

unresponsive. It is determined to find a better solution.

There are several other options, which have been put forward, discussed and analysed. A more integrated approach has been chosen which encompasses several strategies. There is a clear requirement to ensure that growers are fully informed of the all issues surrounding fruit maturity. There are other issues in relation to the local market and that includes grade standards and the perennial question of the role of TAG 3 in the market. There have been calls at AGMs for many years for the AGA to investigate ways of removing TAG 3 fruit from the domestic market. There are several drivers here and they include 1) the belief that TAG 3 fruit depresses the value of TAG 2, 2) that the oil processors need to be supported and that TAG 3 fruit could achieve this well and 3) that the lack of transparency in the domestic market coupled with increasing fruit volumes makes the AGA promotional investment difficult to quantify if all that is being promoted or most of what is being promoted is lower quality TAG 3 fruit.

The AGA is determined to build demand for avocados in the New Zealand domestic market. The demand that is built must have value so that grower returns are protected and hopefully increased. This needs to be done urgently and on the back of steady and quite dramatic increases in domestic market volumes over the past 5 years. To understand how dramatic this growth has been, consider that the domestic market has grown from 270,000 trays (96/97) to over 700,000 trays last year (00/01).

In addition the AGA has been grappling with the strong New Zealand government food safety drive. The Fruit Growers Federation response has been to encourage sectors to adopt the VegFruit Quality Assurance programme. After prolonged consideration and engagement with the Quality Assurance working party the AGA decided to develop its own Food Safety programme to be “piggy backed” on the back of the export “Quality Programme”. This decision was made primarily on cost especially compliance costs, focus on food safety only and harmonisation with the industry export programme.

The AGA has agreed to the following integrated strategy to address food safety and the domestic market quality issues. The AGA will, over the next 18 months, develop a Food Safety programme that is compatible with the export Quality programme and address the government requirements in terms of the existing and proposed food safety requirements. This is to be developed as part of an expanded Quality Manual. A specialist in this area has been contracted to develop this chapter. The AGA is very keen to ensure that food safety does not become a catch all and that the programme focuses on food safety rather than the wider sustainability and human well-being issues incorporated in other programmes such as

EuropGap. There are obviously wider issues such as all export market access and chemical issues. This is why strong harmonisation within one manual with associated reduced audit costs is so important. There will obviously be strong and vigorous engagement of the exporters into this development to ensure that existing investments and developments in this area are not marginalized and that ability to continue to meet all market requirements is maintained.

Fruit that has met food safety compliance requirements is differentiated and therefore requires identification and to achieve that a “Avocado Quality Mark” is being developed.

This will cover both food safety and fruit quality. There is obviously work to be undertaken by the AGA to educate customers, the Health Authority (which will deal with the Food Safety issues) and consumers as to the value encapsulated in the Quality Mark. For the first time it gives the AGA the ability to manage grade and quality (including maturity standards) in the domestic market. The challenge facing the AGA and all growers is to ensure that this is achieved at a minimum cost and with a minimum of bureaucracy (which the AGA can control).

In relation to fruit quality and specific to maturity the AGA has agreed to ensure that it is easier for growers to comply with local market maturity requirements. This will be achieved by earlier industry monitoring of maturity in key regions, publishing the results on the website and reminding all growers (by letter) of the benefits of offering customers and consumers fruit that is mature and offers them more than just shelf life. Growers should be in a position to support this approach. How well it is supported will be reflected by comments from growers at the AGM and hopefully a significant reduction in complaints in relation to immature fruit received by the AGA office from irate customers and consumers of our premium product.