

MEDIA RELEASE
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ADDING VALUE - AUTOMATICALLY

'Adding value' could well be the catch cry for Auckland tomato grower and packer Status Produce, which sees the industry going from strength to strength, despite grower numbers dropping by 75% in the past 10 years.

The company, which grew out of a joint venture involving PTO Packhouse, has been running tomatoes through its packhouses 5 days a week, 52 weeks a year, supplemented in the April – August period with packing mandarins and re-packing oranges from time to time.

Ask operations manager Graeme Tregidga how the company copes with the volume while maintaining accuracy and containing costs, and he points to the innovative software from Compac Sorting Equipment that has been retrofitted on the company's Pukekohe sorter, and in the four lane Compac colour, weight and diameter sizer running in the Mangere site which supersedes its old two lane unit.

Tregidga says in an industry where the big are getting bigger, faster also means smarter. "High speed sorting and packing is important to us, but we can't afford to sacrifice accuracy. We've been working alongside Compac for several years now and we're confident that the equipment can cope with pretty much anything we can throw at it."

For Status, this means repacking oranges at a rate of around 10 tonnes an hour, using as few as five people. "They certainly are fast machines," he says. "We're running with 13 – 14 people in general which are very low staff numbers for the volumes we put through."

According to Phil Prior, Sales Manager for Compac Sorting Equipment Ltd, the Status set-up is unusual for a New Zealand packhouse. "Due to the packaging involved automated volume filling and carton handling systems have been used, which has allowed the operation to be very lean on shed space and staff numbers," he says. "Although we see this in a number of Compac installations overseas, it is not that common here."

The brain behind the automation is Compac's Windows-based software. Graeme Tregidga says it is particularly operator-friendly. "Anyone with a basic familiarity with Windows, Word and Excel would find it easy to pick up, but having said that, there is a real skill in operation, and a top notch operator can really make the machine hum."

And, with over 14 hectares under glass in three locations, and more tomatoes coming in from growers throughout the Auckland region, the company rates Compac's high speed and accuracy as paramount in keeping up with the lucrative added-value packing, whilst retaining flexibility for both large and small customers

"Compac's flexibility, which allows us to make changes on the run, allows us to sort and pack to some very highly specific requirements that meet buyers' requirements when and where they dictate. The future of the industry has gone the way we were predicting 10 years ago, and we think it will shrink yet again. It's likely that we'll see even more distinctive breaks between pack houses like ourselves, which are large, volume oriented, packing to meet particular needs, and the general supply packers whose prime outlet is the market."

Increasingly, many of the tomatoes sorted and packed at Status are destined for the food service sector, where Mr Tregidga says there are 'scary volumes' being quoted, especially with the increase in salad lines; good news for growers, packers and fast-food junkies alike.

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More information:

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About Compac Sorting Equipment:

Manufacturers of high speed, accurate sorting systems for fruit and vegetables, Compac is a world leader in fruit sorting technology, through on-going commitment to research and development.

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