

New packhouse proves its worth

Story and photos by Dianne King

At the Summerfruit Orchards Ltd property at Earnsclough, near Alexandra, about 310 workers are employed to handle the apricot and cherry crops, says general manager Ian Nichols.

A new \$2.6 million packhouse and coolstore complex, covering the equivalent of eight tennis courts, was in operation for the 2004-2005 season.

With an early season and the overlap in varieties this year, the packhouse had two graders in operation, requiring about 120 of the 310 staff to handle the fruit for both export and domestic markets.

Ian says he would hate to be facing this year's apricot volumes without the facility.



Fresh plus - Summerfruit Orchards Ltd packhouse manager Jeff Coley sizes up a pottle of apricots for the domestic market which are popular for families with small children.

The apricot crop is over twice the size of last year's and when asked for tonnage, which could be commercially sensitive, he was prepared to estimate apricot volumes at more than 400 tonnes.

In mid-January, the company was half-way through handling the apricots and cherries were almost finished.

The complex includes a 240sq m administration and staff facilities block, the main packhouse is about 1700sq m, has a 900sq m dedicated load-out area, with heavy investment in 3000sq m of 140kw of refrigeration.

"The dedicated palletising area links to the coolstores to

allow for a consistent cool chain flow and proved as successful as anticipated," Ian said.

Cherries were under way in early December and the first of the apricots were marketed pre-Christmas.

Burlatt cherries brought in good prices before Christmas at around the \$10/kg mark and the export market has been reasonably strong, size dependent and priced generally around \$10 a kg. "Most of the export fruit has gone by air."

The cherry variety Sweet Valentine was developed at Summerfruit Orchard Ltd and grower agreements require that all the fruit of this variety to be packed through the Summerfruit Orchard packhouse. as a condition of using the budwood.

"The biggest throughput this year will probably be Lapins," Ian said.

Fortunately, in comparison to previous years, there had been no problems finding staff for the 2005-2006 crop.

"That's probably due to the early season. There are still plenty of students around and is also due to the fact that all our efforts in procuring staff have paid off."

The company used every avenue to advertise vacancies, including direct advertising in the print media. "Staff accommodation remains an issue for the industry and for us".

"Fruit flavour has been good in apricots this year," Ian said.

The company supplies a Woolworth's marketing programme in Australia and also Tesco in the United Kingdom.

"We also have a good relationship with Foodstuffs for the local market."

In the packhouse bright yellow crates were filled with layers of pottles of apricots.

Packhouse manager Jeff Coley said the 750gm pottles for the domestic market had been very popular with the consumer.

"The fruit is an ideal size for kids and is attractive to buyers because of the size and price."

Ian Nicholls said among the apricot varieties being packed were Vulcan, Clutha Star, and Alex.

"We will finish with the Nevis apricot, one bred by the Nevis Fruit company in Central Otago." 🍏



On the move a line of cherry sorters at Summerfruit Orchards Ltd packhouse at Earnsclough, near Alexandra.