

Draft- perfecta
Media Release

1 September 2003

GRADING VEGETABLE WORLD'S 'SENSITIVE NEW AGE' GUYS

A change from mechanical to computerised technology is helping Tasmania's Perfecta Produce ensure that their export onions meet stringent European standards without compromising the inherent fragility of the produce.

And, whilst the onion is often perceived to be a rough and tumble vegetable, it's really one of nature's Sensitive New Age Guys; looking for gentle handling to prolong its shelf life.

Perfecta Produce's 20 year old family business has moved from hand sorting and mechanised sizing to a four lane unit from Compac Sorting Equipment, which has revolutionised the weight, sizing, colour and shape grading processes without compromising the product's need for gentle handling.

A significant advantage, according to Perfecta's Darren Broadby, is the improvement in precision; the mechanical sizing system provided a rough estimate, whilst Compac's unit is accurate down to the last 10 grams.

"Supermarkets in Europe and our export markets were getting tougher on the quality of the skin and the shape of the onions," says Broadby. "Our main consideration was to find a grader that had the flexibility and precision to grade by shape and blemish along with greater accuracy in sizing than we'd been getting. The equipment also needed to consider the effects of shedding skins, dirt and dust around precision equipment."

Whilst Compac units are being used in the US, NZ and elsewhere in Australia for onion grading, Perfecta is the first onion packhouse in Tasmania to run the Compac unit. South Australia's Rivapak Pty Ltd was one of the early leaders, using the technology to build market share by incorporating the requirements of five growers into one packhouse, with Compac as its driving engine.

Darren Broadby says the Compac team has worked alongside the company to understand the complexities of onion handling. "The skins make each onion look different depending on where it is on the machine, so it can be difficult for the computer to get a correct image. We're comfortable with where we are, but we can still see ways we could improve shape grading."

Compac Sorting's James Flocchini says onion packhouses are joining their horticultural cousins in seeing the added value of electronic sizers. "We are in the fortunate position of being able to use the results of our research and innovation across a range of packing needs; what we've developed for one industry can be seamlessly integrated into another. A big benefit is the flexibility, with even small sizing changes possible with a few computer key strokes."

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