



Potato grower Basil Mondello of Gawler River Produce believes the latest technology is the way to meet competition with produce quality.

Gawler River site a world leader

Potato growing and packing is an industry struggling against over-supply and prices that would look more at home in 1985 than 2005, but despite this, it continues to be the backbone of the Australian vegetable industry, according to some observers.

However it is also the domain of individuals such as Basil Mondello at Gawler River Produce, a company with more than 36 years experience and regarded as one of Australia's major packhouses.

According to Mr Mondello, it is a far cry from the days when packing potatoes was as straightforward as putting them into a 20 kilogram bag and sending them out.

"These days the game is all about balancing supply and demand, trying to get the best price in an over-supplied market overlaid with quality assurance at every step," he said.

He believes the answer lies in technology.

Following extensive development of technology for the potato industry in Australia by Compac Sorting Equipment, Gawler River recently chose to install an eight-lane Compac InVision 9000 blemish sorting system. It was the first sale of such a fully integrated blemish sorting system for potato packing anywhere in the world.

This unique position suited Mr Mondello, who delights in doing what is usually labelled impossible.

"We put in eight new lanes of machinery from scratch and said we wanted it up and running in 10 days. Everyone said it was impossible, but together we got it done and we haven't looked back."

The blemish grader has been running for three months and consistently putting through 22-25 tonnes of washed potatoes an hour – more than double Gawler River's old mechanical sizer.

"It was running so well that we were tempted to push it along to see what it could do. We've given it a good work-

out running up to 30 tonnes/hour, and even putting through 17 tonnes on four lanes – and they were just flying through – so there's clearly bigger capability than we expected."

The investment in Compac's technology has helped Gawler River reduce labor by 30-40% and improve production by 20-30%. These were key factors in Mr Mondello's decision to take the step, along with a desire for improved accuracy and better quality sizing – both big issues for the industry as supermarket chains become more specific in their requirements.

"We looked at other machinery but we decided to go with our own judgement in the end," he said. "We knew weight sizing wasn't an issue, and figured that if the cameras were as good as Compac said they were then it'd be a far superior unit to anything else. We're happy with the result and results so far indicate we've made the right choice."

Compac's Australia market manager, Pari Padrevita, said the potential for the blemish grading capabilities of the Compac InVision 9000 blemish sorting system was significant for the large Australian potato market.

"We've put a lot of effort into this industry and we've been active since 1997 with solutions for potato packing. However, overall there's been a relatively slow uptake of sophisticated technology in this part of the packing industry partly because of the vagaries of blemish grading up till now.

"But, as the Gawler River site shows, Compac's blemish graders cope well with the range of Australian washed potato varieties.

"I believe we'll see more installations quite quickly as pack houses rise to meet the external demands of supermarkets as well as the internal, bottom line-driven requirements of more production at less cost."

Contact: Pari Padrevita, mobile 0418 269 754, website <www.compacsort.com>.

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A new Compac blemish sorting system installed at Gawler River Produce is the first of its kind in the world.