

Vote of confidence in Otago industry

By Dianne King

A new \$2.6 million packhouse/coolstore in Central Otago to pack cherries and apricots is due to open in December.

The complex indicates confidence in the summerfruit industry and underlines its significance for the Central Otago economy.

Summerfruit Orchards Ltd's venture at Earnsclough near Alexandra is also believed to be the largest capital investment of its type in Central Otago for fifteen years.

The site for the state-of-the-art facility covers the equivalent space of eight tennis courts, will house two graders and three coolstores, as well as an administration centre.

The complex includes a 240sq m administration and staff facilities block, a 1440sq m main packhouse, a 900sq m dedicated load-out/storage area, and heavy investment in 400sq m of refrigeration with 140kW capacity. A dedicated palletising coolroom adjoins the dispatch coolstore to ensure coolchain is preserved.

At the time the company applied for resource consent through the Central Otago District Council, the chairman of the board of directors, Jeremy Elvidge said indicative volumes through the complex would be in order of 600 to 700 tonnes for apricots, 300 tonnes for cherries, with nectarines around the 200 tonne mark.

Orchard manager Ian Nichols is excited and also a little bit daunted about the facility which is being set up to cater for the export market.

"This venture is a vote of confidence in the industry. A sign of where the industry is at is that we have to secure our own packing, particularly in cherries, because increases in planting have not in turn been followed by investment in the best post-harvest facilities.

It's a bit daunting because we're stepping into a new field of packing apricots, where in the past we have contracted this work out.

"This new system will allow us to have more flexibility in packing fruit both for export and local market. We see the local market as a distinct market where we must still have a quality product."

This [complex] gives us a lot more opportunity to meet the demands of the market, both export and local. It's improving our vertical integration, maintaining control of the product for longer periods of time with the aim of better meeting the requirements of our end-point consumers."

A forced-draught chiller among the refrigeration plans, allows scope to remove field heat as quickly as possible as fruit travels from harvest to the packed carton which moves to the palletising area, which will be kept at between 0degC and 2degC.

The new Compac grader for apricots and nectarines also allows for a defect sorter module to be added.

The cherry grader, where some components were sourced from Australia, gives the company increased capacity, again with a dedicated cool chain system, including the hydro-cooler.

Summerfruit Orchards new facility could be compared with the up-market pipfruit complex built by Con van der Voort and his family at Ettrick, where noise from the machinery is minimal.

"We're using a two-lane variation of Con's four lane machine." The new facility meets all EurepGap and BRC requirements.

Ian said the driving force behind the project have been company chairman Jeremy Elvidge and majority shareholder, Andy McGrath.

When contacted Jeremy Elvidge said the project had been his main mission for the last two years. The project was deemed a major transaction under the company constitution, and together with raising the necessary capital, required 75% approval of the shareholder-stakeholders.

"Some have large investments, others just 1000 shares and they all needed to have the opportunity to have their say. We've got over 80% approval and that's quite a mandate."

This time last year the project was going through the resource consent process and the compliance issues highlighted that the building platform was in an historic flood zone.

"We applied for Resource Consent for the project and the final site location had to be negotiated through the district council as well as the Otago Regional Council," Jeremy said. Compromise was reached and the site area was moved further back from the road.

Ian Nichol expects the complex to be completed by early December, when the first of the cherries are expected to come on line. "There's been plenty of bloom, but it's early days yet," he said.