

Future Orchards 2012 - Western Australia Orchard Walk March 2007

Notes prepared by Alan Hill, Western Australian Fruit Growers' Association

Field Day: Tuesday 27th March 2007

Location: Atherton's Orchard
Donnybrook – Boyup Brook Road
Donnybrook

Attendance: 19 people attended the field day, 13 commercial fruit growers and 5 industry people, Craig Hornblow (Agfirst), Alma Reynolds (APAL), Alan Hill & Brendon Cant (WAFGA) and John Sutton (DAFWA).

Agenda:

- Managing Cripps Pink harvest and storage for optimum fruit quality and outturn
- Future Orchards 2012 website
- New planting options 2007 and beyond
- Inspection of the Cripps Pink crop
- Monitoring block meeting

Presentation and Discussion

Craig commenced his presentation with an overview of the Future Orchards 2012 website. There appeared to be a low level of awareness of the Future Orchards website from the assembled growers, and so this aspect was explored in detail, including discussion on it being a no-cost access for levy payers, its ease of use and the volume and relevance of the information contained on the site.

Craig then conducted a very effective demonstration of the importance of good harvest and storage practices by conducting a 'blind' tasting of 3 apple varieties (Gala, Fuji and Pink Lady) that had been purchased earlier that day in Bunbury. It was acknowledged by growers that there was little or no control of, or communication with, the retail sector and that this often limited their understanding of the issues for consumers.

Craig commented that irrespective of this, a greater adherence to maturity standards would consistently deliver a better product to the consumer. The maturation climactic was discussed at length and various growers spoke on their assessment of when fruit was ready for harvest. Craig discussed the NZ approach to harvest and highlighted differences between there and in Australia. Discussion then occurred on the various

'tools' that were available to growers including exten-day, regalis, hail/bird netting and pruning options. Growers raised the issue of 'control' and that many issues that impacted were outside their 'control', such as unfavourable weather conditions, poor quality nursery trees and poor water quality. Craig spoke passionately about his experience both in NZ and across other countries and the need to 'focus on the variables that we can influence, as some issues, such as weather and nursery stock will never be entirely to growers' liking. His approach was then to use the resources available, such as planting density to address poor quality nursery trees and hail netting for sunburn control.

Craig then introduced the issue of varietal selection with the question "Do we want a new apple or do we want a better old apple?" He noted that between 1999 and 2004 over 200 new apple varieties had been given PBR in Europe. Craig stressed the importance of growing 200 tonne in the first five years of production and that all varietal selection should be on long term planning of 'best fit', considering both growing and marketing rather than by speculation on market demand.

Orchard Walk

Two blocks were inspected:

- Block 1. Cripps Pink, planted 1998, 4.5 x 2.0 spacing, Central Leader
- Block 2. Cripps Pink, planted 1998, 4400 trees/ha, Open V planting

In block one, Steve Atherton commented that these trees had been very poor from the nursery and that they had not filled the space, and with the benefit of hindsight they should be planted at 4.5 x 1.2 or 1.0. Craig again commented about the need to focus on what we can control, therefore if nursery trees were always going to be an issue, then it is our response to the issue which is important, as growers have influence over planting density and vigour.

Monitoring Block Meeting

Craig noted that WA is along way to come and that he was very keen to maximise his time in the State, given consultants were here for only 4-6 days per year. Options discussed were to have meetings earlier in the day or if that was not suitable, then to visit monitoring blocks individually to discuss issues. He commented that in other States monitoring block proprietors were conducting activities, such as fruit counts and comparing these across the group. This activity was not occurring in Western Australia however it was noted that it could, once monitoring block proprietors reached agreement on the required activity. Alan Hill noted that funds to assist in data collection and reporting could be available for this activity through WAFGA. The group also discussed risk mitigation and suitable levels of Return On Investment.

Issues to follow up

- Placing and advising of reports on the Future Orchards 2012 website
- Follow up growers Lee Williamson and Joe Patane as monitoring block proprietors

- Liaise with existing Monitoring Block proprietors for preferred timing and activities for the June field walk and any combined data collection which they wish to see conducted
- Ensure photo points are collected prior to Cripps Pink harvest