



The threat of introduced disease from across the Tasman through potato imports could affect tomato, capsicum and eggplant crops.

# Industry awaits NZ risk analysis

By LOUISE McBRIDE

**C**ONCERNED potato producers are nervously awaiting the findings and recommendations of the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Committee inquiry into New Zealand potato imports scheduled for release on March 20.

Its brief has been to address biosecurity risks for the Australian potato industry should fresh product be allowed to be imported from NZ for processing.

Processed NZ potatoes are already being allowed in as frozen French fries and crisps.

The NZ potato industry is affected by many pests and diseases not present in Australia, including devastating zebra chip, which reduces yield and downgrades quality because of discolouration of the product, and ultimately the death of the plant.

Large-scale seed potato producer Ben Dowling, Mount Gambier, said allowing the import of fresh potatoes for processing from New Zealand is an unacceptable risk that Australia should not take, and he hopes the reality of such moves being "needless, impractical and unaffordable" means it will not happen.

He said that allowing NZ apple imports shows biosecurity measures have been threatened.

"The NZ apple situation is an example of how Australia has taken a risk, and then the system has been challenged at the borders with containers being rejected on the basis of being such a biosecurity risk," Mr Dowling said.

"We should not be needlessly challenging our border protection systems with unacceptable risks. I just hope that the government decides against accepting imports of fresh processing potatoes from NZ."

The threat of introduced disease from across the Tasman through potato imports could also affect tomato, capsicum and eggplant crops, which together represent \$1.5 billion of Australia's agricultural production.

South Australian Senator Nick Xenophon – who was involved with the inquiry – said "this little bug, could end up being a big problem".

"Australian farmers are already doing it tough without the Govern-



ment putting their crops at risk through inadequate biosecurity rules," he said.

Senator Xenophon said the Closer Economic Relations Trade Agreement Australia has with New Zealand appeared to be the root of the problem.

"In principle, the CER is good for both countries," he said.

"But we can't let free trade principles stand in the way of protecting our clean, green image."

He said this has occurred before with Australian imports of horticultural products, and it will "keep happening unless the government improves biosecurity protocols".

Despite the threat of government policy decisions hanging over the Australian potato industry, Mr Dowling is confident of a promising future.

His business, Dowling Agritech, recently invested heavily in developing a new seed potato handling facility on his South East property.

"This will give us the ability to handle large tonnages of seed potatoes from harvest through to cool storage and up to seed ready for planting, all at the one site," Mr Dowling said.

"We have employed more people – and have four full-time staff and up to 12 casuals.

"We do have confidence in the industry as a whole, even though the processing sector is shrinking.

"We believe if we continue to produce high-quality seed potatoes, the industry has a very good future."

With the expansion, Dowling Agritech is now the biggest seed potato producer in South Eastern Australia.

The company exported more than 800 tonnes of seed in 2012, which is set to double this year with the new facilities.

It exports to South-East Asia where there is strong demand for Australian seed stock. The industry's reputation is based on a solid biosecurity image.

"Domestically, we supply seed potatoes to Atherton in Far North Queensland, all the way down to Warrambool in Victoria," he said.

When Dowling Agritech was established in 1997 there were no seed potatoes in the region but now it has the largest seed operation in South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales.

The company produces more than 9000t from 240 hectares.

It is in partnership with Eurogrow, which helps access new varieties from Europe.

"While our main concern is the threat of disease from NZ due to policy decisions, we hope the government and industry will take all steps possible to avoid this," Mr Dowling said.

