

NZ potato debate not about access



By **ROBBIE DAVIS**
CEO, Potatoes South Australia



THE PMA Australia + New Zealand Fresh Connections Conference and Trade Show held at the Sydney Convention Centre recently provided invaluable opportunities for networking with national and international industry stakeholders and learn from the impressive line-up of international speakers.

This annual event establishes the benchmark for the Australasian fruit, vegetable and floral industry value chains.

Attending on behalf of Potatoes South Australia Incorporated, I had the opportunity to introduce the organisation and reinforce our objective of being the peak industry body and representative voice of the industry value chain in the State.

I was fortunate to be included as a panellist in the Big Debate: Strong Biosecurity – the costs and benefits for a vibrant fresh produce industry.

Other panellists included Giumarra Companies, California, US president Tim Riley; Horticulture New Zealand CEO Peter Silcock; Joe Vizzarri, Vizzarri Farms Pty Ltd, Koo Wee Rup, Victoria; and Australian chief plant protection officer, DAFF, Vanessa Findlay.

The debate focussed on Australia's reputation for fiercely defending its imports and how this approach impacted on market access.

PMA chair-elect Tim Riley related domestic industry successes following market access for imported avocados into US from Mexico, and Joe Vizzarri, Australia's largest asparagus grower, spoke of the



▲ A scene from the PMA Australia + New Zealand Fresh Connections conference and trade show this year. The annual event sets benchmarks in industry value chains.

importation of off-season asparagus from Chile into Australia.

Mr Silcock defended potential exports of fresh product from New Zealand to Australia, with the importation of fresh potatoes for processing as the prime example. Ms Findlay provided information on the management, maintenance and improvement of Australia's plant health system, particularly with respect to Australia's biosecurity and trade policy.

That left me, a campaigner and lobbyist for the future viability of Australian potato industry, defending the industry's position to reject the market access request from the New Zealand Ministry for Primary Industries for the importation of fresh potatoes for processing.

The heated debate centred on the fact that one country's biosecurity is another's market access. This was highlighted by the

threat of an incursion of the devastating zebra chip disease complex should market access for New Zealand potatoes be granted by DAFF Biosecurity Australia.

Toby Travanner was a highly skilled conference MC and debate moderator, particularly concerning the seating arrangements during the debate – Peter Silcock and I were at opposite ends of the sofa, with Vanessa Findlay in the centre!

Zebra chip disease complex was an accidental incursion to New Zealand in 2006, and by 2009 it had spread across the country. Estimated losses because of it was \$120 million in 2011.

It has also caused hundreds of millions of dollars in losses in the North American states of Washington State, Idaho and Oregon. The disease reduces yield and results in a downgrading of quality because of distinct discoloration in the shape of brown/black stripes in the tuber and ultimately, death

of the plant.

Yield losses of as much as 50 per cent are anticipated in Australia because of zebra chip and other exotic diseases should the Federal Government stall on banning the approval of market access for New Zealand potatoes. This equates to \$0.4 billion.

The reporting date of the Senate Inquiry concerning the biosecurity risks to the Australian potato industry of fresh potatoes imported from New Zealand for processing held on October 24, 2012 has now been extended until July 19, 2013.

The Senate Committee is seeking additional information concerning the risk estimation matrix, a tool used by DAFF to calculate risk factors.

From an industry perspective, it is considered that this is not about free trade or trade protection as Australia already receives processed products from New Zealand in the form of frozen French fry and crisp chips.

Workshop covers novel crop practices

MEMBERS of the South Australian potato industry got together in June to discuss key potato research and development issues at an industry workshop at Coonawarra, South Australia.

Growers, processors, agronomists and researchers were part of the program.

The workshop was organised as part of the AUSVEG-managed potato industry extension program and was free to attend for all potato levy payers and other industry members.

AUSVEG communications and public affairs manager William Churchill said it was a valuable opportunity for the State's potato industry members to hear about novel crop management practices, and discuss a range of R&D issues in what is a challenging time for the industry.

AUSVEG is the leading horticultural body for Australia's

potato growers who number more than 2000.

The workshop was chaired by Kalangadoo potato grower and South East Potato Growers Association chairman Andrew Widdison, who moderated a question-and-answer panel session; and AUSVEG chief executive officer Richard Mulcahy who spoke about the potato R&D program, AUSVEG R&D related activities, and the industry-endorsed fresh and processed potato strategic investment plans.

"This workshop was part of a week-long potato R&D roadshow arranged by the potato industry extension program, which is visiting key potato growing regions of Victoria, Tasmania and South Australia," Mr Churchill said.

"AUSVEG has held successful potato R&D workshops in Creswick, Victoria, before that and presented at Devonport,

Tasmania, each of which was attended by more than 40 members of the local industries, including a large number of leading growers operating in these areas."

The extension program is an industry-funded initiative that aims to raise awareness about potato R&D activities and provide producers with valuable information to use on a practical level.

"It is very reassuring to see such strong support for these workshops, which aim to foster new ideas and approaches to potato production, and to equip growers with information that will help to increase their efficiency, competitiveness and profitability in the years to come," Mr Churchill said.

The project was funded by HAL using the national potato levy and matched funds from the Australian Government.

Details: AUSVEG 03 9882 0277.