

Hort shorts

Baby spuds on auction

SPRING has sprung and that means new-season baby potatoes from the Adelaide Plains are in the marketplace. The small, round, perfectly formed spuds packed with vitamins A and C, and potassium are perfect companions for lamb, beef, pork, game, poultry and seafood and of course, brilliant in salads. And for the first time, the season's first were auctioned.

Potatoes South Australia Incorporated chief executive officer Robbie Davis said the auction was a fitting start to the season for the nation's biggest potato producer.

"SA is the nation's largest potato producer, with farmgate production worth \$206 million, and it was only fitting that we celebrated this arrival with an inaugural auction," she said. The recent auction was at the Adelaide Produce Markets. Funds raised were donated to the Little Heroes Foundation, a charity dedicated to supporting children living with cancer and other serious illnesses, and their families.

"It brought out the best among SA's philanthropic vegetable merchants, growers and other stakeholders keen to secure the best potatoes of the season and make a positive contribution to charity," Ms Davis said. "Not only was the auction a chance to attain the finest potatoes in the country, but also an opportunity to support a worthwhile cause."

Import lines blur

By MALCOLM SUTTON

THE Australian potato industry has told the Federal Government it maintain a ban on importing fresh potatoes from New Zealand.

A Senate Standing Committee heard how NZ's request for a licence could result in as much as a 50 per cent yield loss for South Australian producers who supply about 80 per cent of fresh, washed product, for the domestic market.

Potatoes SA chief executive officer Robbie Davis said NZ had many exotic pests and diseases that could negatively impact on Australia.

"At the moment, consideration is only given to potato cyst nematode, potato black wart and zebra chip in the Department for Agriculture, Fisheries & Forestry's draft report," she said.

"But the disease that's on everyone's lips at the moment is zebra chip complex," Ms Davis said.

"Estimated losses in the NZ and United States industries due to zebra chip are in the hundreds of millions of dollars.

"South Korea has banned imports from disease-infested states in America – we must do the same concerning NZ."

Ms Davis acknowledged that Australia's quarantine and biosecurity processes were among the best in the world, but that potential for human error remained.

"We, as a peak industry body, are not slamming DAFF – we want to resolve the problem," she said.

"But right now, we feel that the science isn't up there for us to be able to manage

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- Local growers exposed

the disease if it came to Australia."

The Senate Standing Committee on Rural & Regional Affairs and Transport is expected to make its report on The proposed importation of potatoes from NZ on November 21.

It comes as the government continues to promote its newly released draft Biosecurity Bill 2012 which, if successful, will replace the Quarantine Act 1908.

But the standing committee's deputy chairman Senator Bill Heffernan said changes being made moved away from precautionary measures and risk-management principles for the sake of free trade.

He said the government could be willing to relax biosecurity laws under pressure from countries that wanted to export to Australia.

Last year, the government allowed fresh NZ apples into Australia for the first time in 100 years, exposing local growers to the risk of fireblight.

Like zebra chip, which has no cure and for which there are no resistant varieties, fireblight has no single effective treatment and has significantly damaged fruit production in North America, Britain, Europe, the Middle East and NZ.



Potato SA chief executive Robbie Davis says Australia should import only processed potatoes from New Zealand, which it already does in the form of frozen chips and french fries.

Independent Senator Nick Xenophon said that allowing fresh potatoes and apples into Australia from NZ was "fair trade gone mad".

"I think we need a complete overhaul of the biosecurity legislation," he said.

"Even with the apples, every Australian apple farmers need to be looking over their shoulder and be put to even more expense to have risk management measures in place in relation to fireblight.

Ashbourne Valley Orchards' Andrew Boag said the government did not care if Australia stopped producing food altogether.

"It's almost cheaper if they import it, and there's no votes out here," he said.

If fireblight got into Australia, the pear industry would be "shot" and the apple industry would not be far behind.

But he feared that the World

Trade Organisation was putting pressure on Australia to open its borders and override its biosecurity standards in the process.

"In some ways the governments' hands are tied anyway," he said.

"But if fireblight gets here and we have to pay-out these farmers in compensation, that's probably going to cost the government a lot less than fighting the WTO in court."

Other fresh produce industries are keeping a close eye on the issue, which has caused ripples of concern throughout Australia.

"We're a global society now and we need to export so we stay sustainable in so many ways," Onions Australia chairman Andrew Moon said.

"And we can't say we can't import either – you can't have it one way or the other."

Federal Agriculture Minister Joe Ludwig did not respond to queries by deadline.

