

AUSTRALIA

SwarmFarm launches cropping robots

SwarmFarm Robotics an Australian technology start-up has launched its robot technology for use in cropping, which will improve productivity, lower costs and reduce environmental impacts.

The launch on 22 March included a multi-robot demonstration of spot-spraying weeds at a farm in Emerald, central Queensland.

"The robots are adjustable in height, with a simple design that can be used on a variety of crops from tree crops and vegetables to sugar cane, cotton and broad acre crops" Andrew Bate told Produce Plus. "They're more like a tool carrier, and can be used for weed spraying and spot-spraying."

Bate said one of the major issues affecting growers in Australia at the moment is herbicide-resistant weeds. So, Bate and his partner Jocie began developing solutions with universities, eventually partnering with the University of Sydney's Australian Centre for Field Robotics and the Queensland University of Technology to develop the robotic technology.

Bate further said, "We're not trying to automate farming, but we want to create better farming techniques to improve yields and efficiencies. These robots have the ability to move slowly, with high-level precision, and perform repetitive tasks with precision."

SwarmFarm Robotics has also announced its partnership with agri-firm Elders, which Bate said has been a fantastic boost for the early stage start-up to go commercial.

Elders national technical services manager Graham Page said, "This technology may prove to be the next big thing for our cropping clients, so we want to be involved from an early stage. The development of robotics has huge implications for agronomy so our partnership with SwarmFarm Robotics will enable us to take an early lead in understanding how this technology works and how we can help our clients apply it."

In the initial stages, SwarmFarm Robotics will focus on the central Queensland region, working with growers to use the technology on tree crops like citrus and macadamia trees, as well as vineyards and cotton.

ARGENTINA

HLB raising heads in Argentina

In Argentina National plant health authority Senasa recently reported seven positive cases of HLB detected in samples of plant material taken in the departments of Iguazú and Eldorado, in the province of Misiones.

Three of the samples were found on commercial farms and four in private gardens in urban areas. Argentina is now intensifying its surveillance programme in the fight against HLB.

Since its first detection in Brazil in 2004, HLB has spread throughout South America and is now present in most of the main citrus producing countries.

In May the Andean Community countries (Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia and Peru) launched a plan of action to combat the spread of HLB, or citrus greening.

The protocol sets out a series of collective measures that the countries have agreed to bring about including phytosanitary monitoring, fumigation in sites where the vector insect is found and the exchange of scientific information about the disease.

COLOMBIA

Colombian fruit exports rise sharply

According to a new report from Maersk Line, fruit exports are fuelling the growth of containerised shipments from Colombia.

There was a 4 % increase observed in the foreign trade in containers in the first quarter of 2016 compared to the same period last year.

Fruit was the main product exported in containers from Colombia during the first three months of 2016. Fruit sales, excluding banana, grew 29 %, partly due to the replacement of traditional sugar cane plantations by a variety of fruit crops, such as pineapples and strawberries.

By including banana exports in the statistics, exports growth soared by 87 % relative to the same period last year.

The report said the rise is explained by a modal shift in exports at the port of Turbo, Antioquia where bananas that were traditionally exported in banana vessels are increasingly being shipped in refrigerated containers, which Maersk claims offer more attractive conditions for Colombian producers, as they allow them to ensure the quality of their product, reach new markets, and strengthen their presence in key markets such as Europe

In parallel, the growth in fruit exports has been reinforced by promotional initia-





tives led by ProColombia, the state trade promotion agency. "A clear example lies in the sale of gooseberries, where a new agreement with the US reached last year to lift restrictions on that fruit has reduced export costs by roughly 40%.

Hass avocados remain one of the most sought-after products in the European market. During the first quarter of this year, Colombia's avocado exports in containers grew 148 % in comparison to the same quarter in 2015. This was largely driven by access to new markets, such as Spain and Belgium.

CHINA

China's berry market leading to great expectations

Expansion in China's retail market is creating new opportunities for marketers of fresh berries driven by rising growth in its urban, middle class population.

That was the trend noted at Global Berry Congress by David Smith of importer SVA Fruits, a joint venture that sells fruit to customers in China on behalf of Chilean exporters Hortifrut and San Clemente.

Painting a detailed picture of the Chinese berry market, Smith predicted further growth in demand and good opportunities particularly for Canada, which recently signed a protocol to send blueberries from British Columbia to China.

He said, "This year has been an amazing year for blueberries in China, from a commercial standpoint." Although the 2014/15 season was not as we had hoped in terms of volume, we're seeing great improvements in the market each year. The protocol for Canadian blueberries was signed last September and they saw 6,040 cases approved to be shipped, but only shipped 2,196. That's about three and a half tonnes, so very little. We have great expectations for the coming season."

When it comes to international berry suppliers to the country, Chile continues to lead the way, exporting over 6,000 in 2015 to both China and Hong Kong. This year, the volume is expected to be a little bit lower and, Smith suggested, was running around 20 % down in mid-March. This, however, was still "way above" the amount shipped two seasons ago.



Chile has a huge advantage compared to British Columbia which pays a 30 % duty on blueberries, plus a 13 per cent VAT. Chile just has to pay VAT, so it has a huge cost advantage over other countries.

CHILE

Demand for pomegranates continues to grow

Even though, as a result of the low temperatures, the harvest was delayed by more than 10 days, Chile's pomegranate campaign is halfway through. Pedro Bejares, of Agrícola San Clemente said, "The spring and summer started with low temperatures, which caused a drop in the production and a delay in the harvest. This also had an impact on sizes, which resulted in a product of a smaller calibre than usual".

Most Chilean pomegranates are intended for the United States, since it is the most appropriate market for the fruit sizes and colour typical of this origin. Furthermore, in markets like Europe, competition is greater and they have other requirements when it comes to calibres, which makes pomegranates from other sources more suitable.

"Demand has been very high, especially in early April, when there are many requests, although in the first half of May the situation started to normalise due to increased supply. Chile enters the market when there is no fruit from other countries, so it faces no direct competition.

It is also worth noting that there has been a decline in prices compared with last year. In the previous season, there was a significant drop in volume, so there was a low supply in a demanding market, which pushed prices up. "Fortunately, the price depends entirely on demand, and demand has been growing every year. Pomegranates have become renowned in recent years for their properties as a superfruit, and while it is not an easy fruit to consume, the consumers have been getting used to it.

ITALY

Challenges faced by the Italian produce market

Recently a ten-year study into the behaviour of Italian consumers in relation to fresh fruit and vegetables has provided several interesting theories which could help turn around a recent significant decline in fresh produce consumption.

This research is compiled by Forli-based Agroter, a publisher of Fruitnet partner Italiafruit News in collaboration with Ismea and Toluna. The publication 'Think Fresh, I Consumi in Testa' was presented in early June by Agroter's marketing director Chiara Daltri in front of 400 industry players (including 60 retailers) at the Palazzo dei Congressi in Florence.

The report shows a gloomy picture of a contestably declining sector with its repose based 200,000 answers taken from interviews with around 13,000 individuals over the course of the past 10 years.

From 2006, a "creeping" downturn in sales of fruit and vegetables in the country has removed 18 % the sector's revenue. Especially significant has been a 7 % fall in fresh fruit sales over the past five years alone.

Categories resisting that trend includes dried fruit, fresh-cut, organic, but the overall picture is worrying. The report also argues that this sector can, and indeed must, do far more. But to engineer a reversal in fortunes a new direction is required.

Roberto Della Casa, managing director of Agroter, identified five factors:

space (by which he meant the surface area of fresh produce departments is currently insufficient), wellbeing, service, performance and, as he put it, (in)formazione. The extraordinary stories behind fruit and vegetables needed to be explained better and more often.

He said "Only by overcoming the gap between perception and reality can we seriously hope to reverse the negative trend. We have fantastic products, but we allow companies that produce supplements to steal our colours and values, we let the world of processing use fruit and vegetables to convey their ideas, while we squabble over the spare change."

MEXICO

Mexico and EU announce plans for organic trade deal

At a recent press conference the Mexican government and the European Commission of Agriculture have announced the start of negotiations on a bilateral agreement for trade in organic products.

The Secretary of Agriculture, Livestock, Rural Development, Fisheries and Food, José Calzada, said, "In the last 15 years the food trade between Mexico and the EU had increased by 150 % from €890m in 2000 to €2.2bn in 2015".

Mexico is looking to position bananas, coffee, honey and beef are in the European market.

Calzada further noted that the European organics market remains one of the most dynamic sectors and Mexico has great potential to develop business opportunities for producers of organic products.

The goal of this exercise is to provide greater prosperity and welfare to our producers and consumers through greater cooperation on matters of common interest.

Around 24,500ha were planted with organic crops in Mexico in 2014, with production reaching 104,000 tonnes with a total value of MXN1.062bn.

TUNISIA

Tunisian dates find demand in Muslim markets

In Tunisia last year the production volumes of dates were quite low. This year, however, the volumes are huge. Exports will worth around 6000 tons per year with a target of 2000 tons for the south Asian country.

The industry is aiming for markets with a large Muslim population, as Muslims are traditionally consumers of dates. Therefore, they have been targeting markets in Asia like Indonesia and Malaysia.

They've been preparing for export to these regions in January to coincide with Ramadan, which will start soon. Once Ramadan has finished, they'll concentrate on secondary markets like Venezuela and Colombia.

The volume is going to be quite large for the Tunisian company, but Mohamed Boumaiza has some concerns with regards to quality. He says, "Our customers are very strict and sometimes have their doubts. Therefore, we invite them to our company to observe our preparation of their shipment. In this way, the customer has a direct overview of the quality of the product they are purchasing."



The prices of dates like other fruits and vegetables are linked to supply and demand, but are also centred around Ramadan. "The harvesting of dates starts in October and November. During the period prior to Ramadan, the prices will increase. During Ramadan, they will remain stable, while afterwards the prices will go down again," explains Mohamed Boumaiza.

There has been a worldwide increase in demand for dates. The company has been working on promotion through exhibitions and other events in countries like Turkey, India and Dubai.

Boumazia further said, "Our main new market is going to be India, where we managed to attract some customers through exhibitions. We now have a contract for 400 tons. Our main competitor in India is Pakistan. Pakistan offers a variety of dates that quite frankly aren't as good as our Deglet Nour variety. However, dates from Pakistan are also cheaper. This is in part due to the shorter transit times with Pakistan being a neighbouring country of India, but also because of the fact that a large population of India is quite poor. These consumers unfortunately can't afford our dates. Still, with a consumer base consisting of millions of Muslims, India remains a very interesting market for our company."

THE NETHERLANDS

Scanning food's unique fingerprint

RIKILT Wageningen UR is part of the international knowledge organisation Wageningen UR (University & Research centre). RIKILT is currently carrying out research on various portable instruments that can measure the composition of products within seconds even through the packaging.

These small instruments need only a few seconds to measure the composition of products and provide information about, for example, their freshness or contamination.

The principle used by these scanners is well-known and dates from the nineteen-fifties. Many of us associate infrared



with TV remote controls and supermarket scanners. In fact, measuring the composition with infrared is comparable to scanning the shopping. In both cases, a scanner shines infrared light on the product and receives the infrared light reflected by the product. A barcode scanner uses this reflected light to identify the barcode, whilst the analytical scanner collects the infrared spectrum that constitutes the product's unique fingerprint.

The product's infrared spectrum is processed by complicated algorithms programmed in the scanner's software. The scanner uses algorithms of the same type as those used by Google.

Although these computation algorithms and software impose a very heavy burden on the computer hardware, following the latest technological developments the software can now run on a tablet or even a mobile. This makes the use of these scanners very simple.

UAE

UAE delegation sees best of Poland bicoloured apples

Delegates from United Arab were invited by the Association of Polish Fruit and Vegetable Distributors to visit Poland in mid-May as part of an agricultural study tour that took in the biggest fresh fruit and vegetable distributors.

The tour was part of the ongoing informational and promotional campaign for Bicolored Apples from Europe, first

launched in 2014 and supported by the European Union, Poland, the Agricultural Market Agency, and the Fruit and Vegetable Promotion Fund.

During the event, guests from the UAE had an opportunity to learn more about the sorting, packing and export certification systems that guarantee the fruits end up at their intended destination.

Delegates heard that Bicolored Apples from Europe are harvested manually and are compliant with high standards of hygiene and internal values, and are assessed for ripeness, starch, Brix and firmness.

They also learned that designated and trained packhouse staff conducts a full quality control check on a daily basis during the entire bicoloured apple sorting process, while additional sampling inspections are carried out by state inspection bodies.

Guests from UAE found out that prior to export, every shipment of bicoloured apples is subject to phytosanitary and pesticide residue inspection by the NPPO, which confirms that the plant product complies with phytosanitary requirements of the country of destination as nominated by the exporter.

Visitors used the opportunity to have a closer look at the storage facilities, where the fruit goes straight from harvest, as well as at the sorting and packing lines. ♦