

'9 Mile' multiplies capacity

Report and photos by John Fitzsimmons



Operations Manager of 9 Mile Fresh James Ryan (left) and stakeholder Mick Ajani of Bonview Orchards.

A MAJOR NEW MULTI-MILLION DOLLAR PACKSHED AND COOL STORAGE INVESTMENT – 9 MILE FRESH – AT TYNONG EAST OF MELBOURNE, REPRESENTS THE BIGGEST FACILITY OF ITS TYPE IN THE SOUTHERN HEMISPHERE AND A MAJOR VOTE OF CONFIDENCE IN THE FUTURE OF AUSTRALIA'S APPLE AND PEAR INDUSTRY.

West Gippsland grower Bonview Orchards and Yarra Valley grower Battunga Orchards are partners in the 9 Mile Fresh enterprise now occupying the former Smiths Crisps potato storage and processing site. Much of the previous potato storage has already been converted and upgraded as Controlled Atmosphere (CA) and Smartfresh™ storage for apples, complementing the more noticeable new construction and equipment.

The 9 Mile Fresh venture represents a significant investment in acquiring eight hectares of land, site works, buildings and equipment. This major investment is primarily in efficiency and economies of scale and capacity to deliver. Both Bonview and Battunga's existing packhouses, collectively handling about 40,000 bins of fruit each season, were due for upgrading and/or expansion. This could have been achieved with significantly smaller individual investments but this would not have delivered dramatically improved capacity or efficiency. The decision was made to pool resources in the 9 Mile Fresh venture which delivers a quantum advance in throughput capacity, efficiency, capacity to meet the 'pack to order' demands of major national customers, and quality of product delivered to the customer.

The brand new facility, installed under a massive 15,000 square metres of roof boasting 8.0 metres of clearance and only one row of supporting columns, has the capacity to process 20 tonnes per hour over the pre-sizer and handle up to 500 bins in an eight hour shift! Incoming fruit is initially gently received into the sanitised water bath before being subjected to the pre-sizer's

four-stage scanning section which images and profiles each individual fruit 70 times for size, weight, colour, internal blemish, sugar content (brix) and internal fault. It is then gently delivered via water flume to one of 51 lanes as a "product that can be sold". This whole section is operated by just two or three people, with sorted fruit collected from the lanes, binned and stored on the floor as required by a fully automated system.

On the other side of the building, separated by a 2,200 square metre mezzanine floor from which stored packaging materials are delivered, are four separate packing lines incorporating bin dumps, wax and polish sections, labellers and carton and bagging options. Four different products and/or varieties can be coming off this line simultaneously.

A fully automated system palletises packed fruit, straps each pallet and locates each pallet of fruit in the inventory system ready for transport or temporary storage as required.

Currently being built under the massive roof are two large scale coolrooms – one between the pre-sizer and the packing line, the other after the packing lines. External verandas are also planned to dramatically expand the under-roof loading areas.

The whole installation has been facilitated over several months with Dutch (Greefa) and Italian (Longobardi) engineers and technicians supporting local tradespeople in the construction, calibration and final commissioning of the most up-to-date equipment available. :afg



