

West Gippsland Fruit Growers Submission – Key Points Agricultural Competitiveness Issues Paper - April 2014

Background & Production in West Gippsland

(Baw Baw and Cardinia Shires).

- Pristine arable land with reliable rainfall, excellent dam building opportunities
- Temperate climate. (High temperatures in January 2014 were managed).
- Proximity to Melbourne markets, Melbourne Port (within 100 k of Melbourne)
- Excellent road allowing access to markets - Princes Freeway
- Hectares under production - 800
- Percentage under hail/sun mesh - 75% to 85%
- Tonnes per annum predicted 2014 - 29,997*
- Opportunity for vast expansion if irrigation continues to be allowed from water harvested from farm dams.
- Production figures predicted for 2014 - \$44,992,000
- Total numbers employed predicted for 2014 - 751
- Packing houses represent world's best practice and latest technology eg\$20m Nine Mile Rd pack house, Tynong
- Educational facilities endorsed by Apple and Pear Australia Ltd

* New/replanted trees on more than 50% orchards = currently producing low yield in transition

All orchards are medium to high density plantings

Responses to questions for consideration:

1. Food security in Australia and globally

- West Gippsland produces high quality apples and pears
- West Gippsland growers consider they produce among the best pome fruit in the world. Can assist in meeting anticipated requirements in rapidly expanding affluent Asian and Middle Eastern markets
- Pests and diseases monitored efficiently and effectively
- Predator mites introduced into the region trees late 1970's. Presence maintained eliminating need for excessive spraying
- An opportunity exists for energy production from cool storage gas emission. Technology should be encouraged by government

2. Farmer decisions for improving farm gate returns

- More efficient data collection. This will enable risk management strategies to be put in place which will allow for income and cost fluctuations, and production variables. Quality data is required for investment, expansion leading to job creation. The "Future Orchards" program has established a nucleus of quality data collection orchards across Australia with five West Gippsland growers represented. This could be expanded. (National "Future Orchards" program commenced in 2009 and funded by government and industry has been highly successful, resulting in production of 85 tonnes per hectare on some local properties. (World's best practice is 65 tonnes per hectare)

3. Enhancing access to finance

- Continuing high Australian dollar has dissuaded West Gippsland growers from exporting produce

New financing models must be developed to enable progressive farming families to remain in agriculture in the event of unfavourable weather events eg excessive storm damage

- New financing models must be developed to
 - assist farm purchase and expansion
 - enable progressive growers to remain in agriculture in the event of excessive unfavourable and unexpected weather conditions

4. Increasing competitiveness of the agricultural sector and its value chains

- Recent supermarket support for Australian suppliers is encouraging however, supermarkets create adverse situations for growers
 - Quality Assurance Competition between the big two supermarkets to continually advance the requirement of quality assurance standards on orchards, cool storage, packing sheds, trucking etc . Becoming unachievable for growers.

5. Enhancing agriculture's contribution to regional communities

- West Gippsland Fruitgrowers advocate a greater Federal Government recognition of role pome fruit industry plays in strengthening the regional communities in Gippsland

6. Improving competitiveness of inputs to the supply chain

- Gippsland farmers are increasingly being affected by urban expansion, and competition for prime agricultural land for housing development
- Water security is of the utmost importance for the advancement of agriculture and in particular horticultural production in Gippsland. On-farm dams managed by farmers must be retained
- Government could encourage our youth to become involved in agricultural training courses and agricultural degrees through advertising, by emphasizing the vast array of exciting skills a career in agriculture demands. Talk up the industry. Horticulture is an exciting career
- Agricultural training courses should be strengthened thus ensuring top end practical skills are acquired

7. Reducing ineffective regulations

- West Gippsland Fruit Growers urge the government to unequivocally ensure that our products are competing on an even playing field internationally
- West Gippsland growers are concerned that the Victorian Government's changed approach to Qld Fruit Fly management in the state now adversely affects West Gippsland apple growers who are restricted in how fruit can be transported intra and interstate. This has become a federal issue. West Gippsland has never had Qld Fruit Fly and should be recognised as a QFF pest free area.
- Continual government department requests for farming statistics should be coordinated. On-going repeat requests for similar data is time consuming and frustrating.

8. Enhancing agricultural exports

- West Gippsland Fruitgrowers support investment in biosecurity protection as a high priority as the cost of control for pest and disease would be devastating. It is of concern however that the Australian Government sanctioned the importation of apples and pears into Australia from countries where *Erwinia amylovora* (fire blight) is prevalent.
- **It is hoped that the proposed Biosecurity Flying Squad as a first response for urgent biosecurity issues is efficient and effective in the event of an outbreak, and that the cost of any consequent procedure is not born by growers.**
- Government increase to "casual" export licenses from approx \$400 to \$4,000 plus servicing costs has made retaining a license "just in case" prohibitive

9. Assessing the effectiveness of incentives for investment and jobs creation

Maintaining good data is a base requirement for any investment or job creation programs.

Please note: The West Gippsland Fruit Growers Association also have active members from the Yarra Valley and Mornington Peninsula growing regions.

**Paul Priest, President, Pakenham Upper. ph 0419346968;
email - paulpriest@outlook.com**

**Mark Trzaskoma, Vice President, Warragul South. ph 0437363887;
email - mark@battungaorchards.com.au**

**Helene Armour OAM, Public Relations Officer, Bona Vista. ph 0429122334;
email - armourh@sympac.com.au**