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Dried grape industry project bears fruit

The first crop of dried grapes planted as part of the Dried Vine Fruit Diversification and Sustainability Initiative will be harvested this season.

The project is part of Dried Fruits Australia's strategy to secure the long-term future of the industry by attracting new investment and increasing production levels.

The Victorian and Federal Governments jointly contributed \$957,900 to kick start the five-year project in 2015.

About 30 dried grape growers are involved, so far planting more than 200 hectares of sustainable new varieties and contributing \$4 million to the local economy.

DFA Chair Mark King said producers could achieve consistently higher yields and quality with rain-tolerant varieties such as Sunmuscat, Sunglo and Selma Pete.

"Australia is one of the smallest producers of dried fruit in the world, and the demand for our product exceeds production," Mr King said.

"We have seen a decline in yield over the past few years, from about 20,000 to 14,000 tonnes a year, which is mostly due to weather. Rain at harvest can result in lower quality fruit of a darker brown, not the natural golden dried grapes that Australia is famous for."

Mr King said the project aimed to return production levels to a sustainable minimum level of 30,000t per annum.

"The initiative has been very successful in delivering 270ha of new development, with a commitment of 400ha in total from the 28 family farms and two dried fruit processors involved," he said.

"It has also created 24 new jobs across the supply chain.

"This year we will harvest the first vines funded by the initiative, and even more fruit will come from the program in 2019."

Parliamentary Secretary for Regional Victoria Danielle Green visited grower Ashley Johnstone's property this month to see the first results of project.

Joined by DFA staff and board members, Ms Green looked at three patches of redeveloped land – Sunmuscats planted in 2015 and ready for harvest, Sunglo planted in 2016, and Selma Pete planted in 2017.

She also toured Sunbeam Foods' Irymple facility, where dried fruit was being processed.

Media contacts

Lauren Roden, Communications Officer
T: 0438 262 242
E: lroden@driedfruitsaustralia.org.au

Mark King, Chairman
T: 0427 272 20