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Sensing quality Australian stonefruit

Three new sensors are being tested on Australian stonefruit to help growers ensure the best piece of fruit is being picked



The Rubens Fluorescent Spectrometer

A new project is equipping Australian stonefruit growers with sensors to help them get the right piece of fruit to the right consumer at the right time.

Sensors for Summerfruit is a 2.5-year A\$1.1m (US\$790,000) Agility Cooperative Research Centre (CRC) project led by Agriculture Victoria in collaboration with RMIT University, Summerfruit Australia and Australian technology companies Green Atlas and Rubens Technologies.

The technologies will be calibrated on Agriculture Victoria's Tatura smartfarm in Goulburn Valley, and then road-tested in commercial orchards and packhouses in Goulburn Valley, Swan Hill, Cobram, and Sunraysia.

David Lamb, chief scientist of Food Agility CRC, said each sensor is able to help growers in different ways.

"From orchard to export, data-driven decisions are key. Two of the sensors,

RMIT's bistatic lidar and Green Atlas' cartographer, will operate in the orchard helping to assess health status and predict fruit size, yield and maturity," said Lamb.

"A third sensor, Rubens fluorescent spectrometer, will be put to work in the packing sheds to detect sweetness, firmness and robustness for transport. It's the closest thing to tasting the fruit, without actually taking a bite."

Ian Goodwin, research leader crop physiology of Agriculture Victoria, said the project aims to benefit the stonerfruit sector by growing export markets and improving their operations.

"Fruit is downgraded or redirected at the harvesting and packing stages because it doesn't meet consumer preferences for that market or, if fruit is harvested too early or too late, the quality can deteriorate in transit," said Goodwin.

"Using these sensors, we could help growers tailor their practices to grow the fruit consumers want, triaging fruit in the packing sheds, and only exporting those robust enough to make the journey."

Trevor Ranford, chief executive of Summerfruit Australia, said the project would focus on the Chinese market but would ultimately be relevant to any export market for Australian stonefruit.

"We have spent years improving our understanding of consumer preferences," said Ranford. "For example, when it comes to nectarines, our Chinese consumers prefer yellow nectarines that are sweet and low in acid, with a redder skin colour."

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