

**Grower-friendly tool for
comparing management and
profitability of vegetable
crops**

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Project Number: VG08004

VG08004

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FINAL REPORT
**Grower-Friendly Tool for Comparing
Management and Profitability of Vegetable Crops**
VG08004

Prepared for : Horticulture Australia Ltd (HAL)
HAL Project No. : VG08004
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PURPOSE OF REPORT

This final report has been prepared to document the outputs completed, processes undertaken, the decisions made and the lessons learnt in developing a “gross margin calculation and comparison tool” for the vegetable industry. Recommendations are also made regarding processes that the vegetable industry may want to undertake before further developments are made to the tool.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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We acknowledge the input and support of the members of our project steering committee: Jeff McSpedden, vegetable grower and Chair of the vegetable industry’s Information and Technology Advisory Group; Danny De Ieso, vegetable grower and Member of the Information and Technology Advisory Group; and Melissa Fraser while she was in her role as the South Australian Vegetable Industry Development Officer.

We also acknowledge: the programming support of Mr Kent Dean of Mildura IT; the assistance of Lucy Jarman and Jim Thomson of AUSVEG in coordinating articles in “Vegetables Australia” magazine and for the preparation of VegeNote Issue 13; and the assistance of Hugh Tobin of AUSVEG in finding suitable photographs to use on the cover of the user manual. We also gratefully acknowledge the input of our colleagues at Scholefield Robinson Horticultural Services, in particular Anne-Marie Strudwick, who assisted greatly with the production of the user manual and on the other outputs of the project.

DISCLAIMER

Any recommendations contained in this publication do not necessarily represent current HAL policy. No person should act on the basis of the contents of this publication, whether as to matters of fact or opinion or other content, without first obtaining specific, independent professional advice in respect of the matters set out in this publication.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Media Summary	2
Technical Summary	3
1 Introduction	4
1.1 Significance to Industry	4
1.2 Aims of the Project	5
1.3 Review of Literature	5
2 Method.....	6
2.1 Communications	6
2.2 Development of the Gross Margin Calculation & Comparison Tool & Supporting Documentation	6
2.3 Information Transfer.....	7
2.4 Evaluation	7
2.5 Reporting	7
3 Results.....	8
3.1 Results of a Survey Conducted at the Vegetable Conference	8
4 Discussion	9
5 Technology Transfer	9
6 Recommendations.....	9
7 References	10

APPENDICES

Appendix 1 Vegetable Industry Conference Survey Question Responses

PROJECT OUTPUTS PROVIDED TO HAL

- CD containing the VegTool 1.0 User Manual and two folders containing installation packages for the VegTool 1.0 program.
- CD containing the PowerPoint Training Module for VegTool 1.0.

MEDIA SUMMARY

Simple Software Helps Growers Assess Potential Crop Profitability

A simple software tool, known as “VegTool” has been developed to assist vegetable growers with comparing vegetable crop gross margins to help determine which crops are likely to generate profitable returns, given relevant production costs and expected prices. Growers can also gain an understanding of the risks involved in growing a particular crop by creating different versions of crop budgets. For example, versions could be developed to show the effect on the bottom line if certain costs increased or if yields were lower than expected.

It is expected that users of the VegTool program will make better decisions about whether to proceed with growing a particular crop, resulting in fewer instances of growers incurring losses. Vegetable industry representatives believe that if many growers use VegTool (or other methods of developing and comparing crop budgets) there will also be fewer instances of the market being disrupted due to over-supply.

Development of the tool has focused on making it as grower-friendly as possible in order to achieve a good level of adoption. The tool is available to all levy-paying vegetable growers and can be obtained along with a free, limited-capability version of Microsoft Access 2007 (known as “Access 2007 Runtime”), enabling it to be used on all computers with Windows XP Service Pack 2, Windows Vista or Windows 7 as the operating system. It is now available and can be downloaded from the AUSVEG website www.ausveg.com.au or obtained on a CD by contacting Gerard Kelly at the NSW Department of Industry & Investment (formerly NSW DPI), phone: (03) 5019 8406, e-mail: gerard.kelly@industry.nsw.gov.au. A User Manual is also provided.

Now that the VegTool development project (VG08004) has been completed, responsibility for the tool and the supporting materials is being handed over to the HAL-funded VegBIZ project (VG08021). To enhance awareness and adoption, the VegTool program will be demonstrated in some of the vegetable-growing regions in workshops coordinated by Gerard Kelly, VegBIZ Project Leader.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The vegetable industry's Information and Technology Advisory Group determined that a key R&D priority for 2008/09 was development of a "tool" that would help vegetable growers make better decisions about what to grow based on an analysis of potential income and likely operating costs. A project submitted by Scholefield Robinson Horticultural Services Pty Ltd ("Scholefield Robinson") was approved by HAL in November 2008.

Grower members of the Project Steering Committee, Jeff McSpedden and Danny De Ieso, guided the development of the tool and emphasised that "simplicity" was the key if growers were to use it for decision-making.

The program, known as "VegTool", is designed to be grower-friendly. Users are able to enter estimated yields, prices and input costs in familiar units, e.g. without having to convert everything into "per hectare" values, to arrive at a gross margin. Users can decide on the level of accuracy, but it is envisaged that the main use of the tool will be to conduct relatively simple comparisons of different crop production "scenarios". The program also caters for growers who wish to include more detail. VegTool allows for the input of yields and prices for different grades of produce, separate harvests and operating cost categories.

Users are able to create and save an unlimited number of scenarios and then compare them on the computer screen or by printing them. This is the mechanism for answering questions such as, "What happens to my gross margin if I make changes to the price or yield or some of the input costs?" or "Am I more likely to make a profit if I grow Crop A or Crop B?"

Initially, the tool was developed using Microsoft Excel as a "platform" but Microsoft Access 2007 was adopted as the eventual "platform" to ensure the program was stable in the vast majority of computer environments. VegTool can be used on all computers with Windows XP Service Pack 2, Windows Vista or Windows 7 as the operating system. The program and the user manual are now available (via downloading or on a CD) to all levy-paying vegetable growers and to service providers who work with the vegetable industry.

The responsibility for the tool and the supporting documentation has been handed over to the HAL-funded VegBIZ project (VG08021). To enhance awareness and adoption, the VegTool program will be demonstrated at workshops in some of the vegetable-growing regions coordinated by Gerard Kelly, VegBIZ Project Leader. Scholefield Robinson will participate in these workshops.

The aim of creating a grower-friendly tool has been achieved. It is likely many growers will be able to use the VegTool program without requiring assistance or training. However, there is a need to lift awareness of its availability and its simplicity via media releases and workshops.

It is expected that users of the VegTool program will make better decisions about whether to proceed with growing a particular crop, resulting in fewer instances of growers incurring losses. Vegetable industry representatives also believe that if many growers use VegTool (or other methods of developing and comparing crop budgets) there will also be fewer instances of the market being disrupted due to over-supply.

1 INTRODUCTION

The Australian Vegetable Industry Development Group (AVIDG) identified that for the supply chain to remain internationally competitive, vegetable producers must have better access to information, particularly about the profitability of different vegetable crops (AVIDG 2006). The vegetable industry's Information and Technology Advisory Group considered this when establishing R&D Priorities for 2008/09 and described the need for development of a "tool" that would help vegetable growers make decisions about what to grow, based on an analysis of potential income and likely operating costs. A project submitted by Scholefield Robinson Horticultural Services Pty Ltd ("Scholefield Robinson") was approved by Horticulture Australia Limited (HAL) in November 2008. Development of a computer program to meet the industry's needs was undertaken by Lauren Thompson from Scholefield Robinson's Adelaide office and Alison MacGregor from the Mildura office.

The first step was to establish a Project Steering Committee. Although the project was approved as originally submitted, it was clear from the discussions in our initial Steering Committee Meeting that a simpler tool was required to meet the needs of the Vegetable Industry. Comments from the vegetable industry representatives indicated that they envisaged a "staged" approach to the development of a "tool". We were advised that the output for this "Stage 1" project should be much simpler than what was described in the submission. The higher level capabilities described in the submission were to possibly be incorporated into a "Stage 2" project at some point in the future.

Also, based on our own experience and the experiences of other service providers who have completed similar projects, we realised that in many Australian horticultural industries, there has been very poor adoption of tools designed to be used "on-line". Although it was possible to make the tool available for use on-line, we considered it likely that the vast majority of users would want the tool to be running on their own personal computer, i.e. copied on to their hard drive from a CD or downloaded via a link on the AUSVEG website.

Proposed changes to the wording of the submission were endorsed by members of the Steering Committee and subsequently approved by HAL.

1.1 Significance to Industry

We were advised by the members of our Steering Committee that there was a concern in the vegetable industry that some growers might be disrupting the market by entering into production of a particular crop following bumper prices of that particular commodity in previous years, without considering the impact of increased supply on future commodity prices. A grower-friendly "tool" was needed that would help growers determine which crops were likely to generate sufficient returns for their businesses at the prices they could reasonably expect to receive.

By making the tool as simple and straightforward to use as possible, and making it readily available to levy-paying growers and the service providers who interact with them, it is hoped that a reasonable level of adoption will occur once vegetable industry members are made aware of its capability and availability. However, there will be a more concerted effort to achieve awareness and adoption via the "VegBIZ" project (VG08021) being managed by Gerard Kelly from the NSW Department of Industry & Investment.

The software allows users to create scenarios and then alter them to reflect potential real-life changes, such as increased water costs or changes in market prices, while keeping all other variables the same. An unlimited number of altered scenarios can be saved and then compared. If a significant proportion of vegetable growers use VegTool (or another method of generating and

comparing crop budgets) to make better decisions about whether to proceed with growing a particular crop, it is likely there will be fewer instances of growers making losses and fewer instances of the market being disrupted due to over-supply.

1.2 Aims of the Project

The main aim of the project was to develop a tool that could be readily adopted by a large proportion of vegetable growers due to it being user-friendly and self-explanatory and readily available.

The VegTool program developed in this “Stage 1” project is characterised by:

- **Simplicity** – Users are able to enter estimated yields, prices and input costs in familiar units, e.g. without having to convert everything into “per hectare” values, to arrive at a gross margin. Users can decide on the level of accuracy, but it is envisaged that the main use of the tool will be to conduct relatively simple comparisons of different scenarios.
- **Flexibility** - Users are able to type in additional crop names, seasons and harvest units. Yields and prices for three grades or three picks can be entered, and a total yield and weighted average price is calculated. There are several instances where “Other” can be selected if users do not find a word describing their particular situation in a dropdown list.
- **Ease of use** – The user interface presents a straightforward, step-by-step process to create a “Scenario” and simple instructions are provided within the tool at each step. There is an option to refer to guidelines and to use cost calculation worksheets. A manual is provided with the software and includes a section that answers the types of questions growers might have.
 - It is easy to manipulate yields, price estimates and input costs.
 - Users are able to save an unlimited number of scenarios and then compare these on the computer screen or by printing them. This is the mechanism for the user to answer questions such as, “What happens to my gross margin if I make changes to particular costs or to prices or yields?” and “Am I more likely to make a profit if I grow Crop A or Crop B?”
- **Availability** – Users can install the tool on their computer from a compact disc (CD) or by downloading it from the AUSVEG website.

1.3 Review of Literature

Several budgeting tools are already available that enable agricultural industries to review costs of production and compare scenarios. They vary in complexity.

The Seasons for Change model developed by SARDI (Taylor 2002) allows the user to alter many variables and compare gross margins for horticulture, and run queries (for example, “find the commodity price that provides positive earnings before interest and tax”), but the data entry interface is considered complex by some.

David Pocock of SARDI modified Seasons for Change for the almond industry to provide a friendlier user interface and include industry specific data, and this was made available for on-line use by almond growers.

Scholefield Robinson tailored the Seasons for Change model for dried grape production as part of a HAL project to look at economic sustainability of that industry in more detail than generic budget models allowed (Swinburn & MacGregor 2007), and particularly to analyse casual labour

requirements, compare profitability of different sized enterprises, and identify minimum prices for dried fruit to ensure that not just variable annual costs but also long term costs were covered.

Scholefield Robinson also adapted the Seasons for Change model to provide irrigators with an on-line decision support tool as part of the PIRSA Drought Business Skilling program (PIRSA 2007). The Drought Business Skilling program includes benchmarks for carrots, potatoes and onions as well as perennial tree crops and vines.

A tool developed by the Victorian Department of Primary Industries (DPI VIC 2008), known as “AgriGater”, includes a version designed specifically for horticulture and is much more complex than the VegTool program. AgriGater uses Microsoft Access 2003 as a platform.

While the decision support tools mentioned above provided ideas for developing an enhanced tool for vegetable producers in a future project, the vegetable industry requested a much simpler tool in this “Stage 1” project. If reasonable adoption of the simple tool is achieved, there may be scope for a “Stage 2” project, which could incorporate these higher-level capabilities into the tool or combining the simple tool’s capabilities and user-friendly interface with those of an existing program.

2 METHOD

The following activities were undertaken to achieve the project aims:

2.1 Communications

A Project Steering Committee was formed and an inception meeting was held. The discussions in this meeting led to a revision of the project submission to reflect the “simple” tool required by the industry in this “Stage 1” project.

Two further Steering Committee meetings were held via teleconferencing during the project, to review the user interface and to ensure that the tool was appropriate to user needs.

2.2 Development of the Gross Margin Calculation & Comparison Tool & Supporting Documentation

The project team:

- Received and followed guidance from the Steering Committee members regarding the capabilities of the tool.
- Prepared and circulated draft Excel-based versions of the tool for review by the Steering Committee.
- Modified the tool based on feedback from the Steering Committee and trialled it with selected vegetable growers.
- Tested the close-to-final Excel-based version of the tool and found it to be “unstable” in some computer environments.
- Decided to use Access as a “platform” and received approval from HAL and the Steering Committee to “transfer” the program to Access 2007.
- Sought final input from Danny De Ieso, the grower member of the Steering Committee who took the strongest interest in the “detail” of the tool.
- Directed the final revisions to the Access-based “gross margin calculation & comparison tool”, to the point of it being ready for release as Version 1.0.
- Developed a simple user manual.

- Packaged the “VegTool 1.0” program and user manual for downloading from the AUSVEG website and for making copies on CDs.
- Developed a simple PowerPoint Training Module for use in “train-the-trainer” activities and in grower workshops.

2.3 Information Transfer

A draft version of the tool was demonstrated at the Australian Vegetable Industry Conference in Melbourne during May 2009. This generated a good level of awareness and enthusiasm for the tool. However, there were not many growers at the Conference.

The aims of the project and the capabilities of the tool have been promoted in articles in “Vegetables Australia” magazine, “Good Fruit and Vegetables”, “Asian Foods Newsletter” and “VegeNotes”. It is also being promoted on the AUSVEG website.

It was our original intention to provide training and support to Industry Development Officers (IDOs) and it was hoped that they would assist with awareness and adoption of the tool as part of their day-to-day activities. It was envisaged that they would distribute CDs during discussion group meetings, at field days etc. However, the IDO positions ceased on 1 July 2009.

Another option that was considered was to mail a CD to all recipients of “Vegetables Australia” magazine. Although an additional budget amount was put onto the project for this purpose, this did not go ahead.

When we were aware that the VegBIZ project (VG08021) had been approved for funding, it was decided that the important “extension” activities would be coordinated through that project. Therefore, the outputs (i.e. the VegTool program, the user manual and the PowerPoint training module) will be formally transferred to VG08021. HAL has agreed to facilitate this process and it is expected that the project staff from VG08004 will be used to conduct some of the workshops in vegetable-growing regions, where the VegTool program will be “rolled out” to vegetable growers and key service providers.

2.4 Evaluation

It was proposed that we would assess whether the tool met the needs of vegetable producers via a written survey to be completed by those who attended the demonstration at the Australian Vegetable Industry Conference in May 2009.

We did not to conduct a survey as formally as we had hoped but the information we were able to collect is presented in the “Results” section of this report and in Appendix 1.

The main means of evaluating the VegTool program in the future will be via the workshops and other activities coordinated through the VegBIZ project.

2.5 Reporting

Two milestone reports were prepared and submitted in accordance with HAL requirements.

This final report is supported by two CDs containing the VegTool 1.0 program, a user manual and a PowerPoint training module. These CDs have been forwarded separately to HAL.

3 RESULTS

This project's results are best represented by the outputs, namely:

- the VegTool program, which can be obtained from the AUSVEG website, along with a free runtime version of Microsoft Access 2007, enabling it to be used on all computers with Windows XP Service Pack 2, Windows Vista and Windows 7 as the operating system;
- the User Manual, which has been published in pdf format; and
- the PowerPoint training module, which will be used as a “train-the-trainer” aid and in workshops with growers.

By agreement with HAL and the Project Leader of the “VegBIZ Project” (VG08021), these outputs will be transferred to VG08021 and used for the initial extension phase of the project. It is envisaged that the VegTool program will be demonstrated to groups of growers and service providers in several vegetable production regions and that the Scholefield Robinson will assist in developing the program, the supporting documentation and delivering some of the workshops.

The workshops conducted via VG08021 will be one means of evaluating whether the tool and supporting materials (i.e. the user manual and the PowerPoint training module) meet the needs of vegetable growers. There will also be scope for gathering feedback from growers who obtain the tool on a CD or by downloading it from the AUSVEG website. These people could be contacted after six months or a year to see if they have made use of the tool.

3.1 Results of a Survey Conducted at the Vegetable Conference

An audience of approximately 60 vegetable conference participants attended a 20 minute presentation on this project by Alison MacGregor. There were several comments and questions at the end of the presentation, including one by the moderator, Mr Romeo Giangregorio. He stated, “If I'd had this tool two weeks ago, I would have saved an enormous amount of time used for setting up an Excel worksheet to prepare for a meeting with my bank manager.”

Alison asked questions of the audience and took note of the responses.

We were not able to distribute a survey to the participants who attended the presentation, however after the session Alison MacGregor made herself available at the AUSVEG stand to meet with individuals who wished to see a demonstration of the tool. She collected responses by these people to our survey questions.

The specific responses at the end of the presentation and by the individuals who viewed the tool at the AUSVEG stand are set out in Appendix 1.

The key comments received were;

- There was a mix of growers and vegetable service providers at the presentation and the feedback on VegTool was positive.
- Simplicity was a feature they liked.
- The special needs of growers of Asian and Middle Eastern backgrounds were mentioned. Some felt that translation of VegTool into other languages would assist in communication with these important parts of the vegetable industry. This would require additional funding.

4 DISCUSSION

Development of the tool has focused on making it as grower-friendly as possible in order to achieve reasonable adoption. The tool is available to all levy-paying vegetable growers and service providers who work with them. We are hopeful that many growers will be able to use it without requiring any support other than what is provided within the VegTool program itself (i.e. in the instructions that appear on the screen) and in the user manual.

Users can take two basic approaches when using the tool:

- Broad estimates can be entered to prepare “quick snapshot” Scenarios, which can then be compared; or
- Income and cost figures can be worked out in a more detailed manner using past accounting records or current prices and recommended practices. This enables the development of “more accurate” Scenarios. Worksheets that assist with this more detailed approach are part of the VegTool program.

Some service providers (e.g. Elder’s employees, extension officers from Queensland DEEDI) have expressed interest in obtaining the VegTool program for use in supporting vegetable growers. This type of “value-adding” is desirable and it is likely media releases will encourage more interest from service providers.

5 TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER

The main mechanisms for transferring technology via this project have been:

- Making the VegTool program and user manual available via the AUSVEG website and from the VegBIZ Project Leader;
- Making the VegTool program very easy to understand so that many growers will be able to use it with minimal support; and
- Helping people understand the program’s capabilities via Issue 13 of VegeNotes, an article in Asian Foods Newsletter and a presentation at the Vegetable Industry Conference in May 2009.

Ongoing technology transfer activities will be managed via the new VegBIZ project (VG08021) and will involve workshops in many vegetable production regions.

6 RECOMMENDATIONS

The workshops that will be coordinated by the VegBIZ Project Leader will be a means of further evaluating the usefulness of the tool. It is likely many ideas for additional capabilities will come out of the workshops and from growers and service providers who are able to use the tool without the need for additional support. It is recommended that the VegBIZ Project Leader and the AUSVEG Communications Manager keep track of who is obtaining the tool on CD and via the AUSVEG website so that these people can be contacted as part of the continuing evaluation of the tool.

It is also recommended that a Scoping Study be conducted to ensure that there is no duplication of capabilities that are available in existing programs and to ensure that possible linkages be explored. For example, during discussions about a more general financial “tool” called

AgriGater, Mr Steve Lorimer (DPI Victoria, Swan Hill) stated that it would be best to combine resources if there was a desire to see the VegTool program evolve into something more complex.

Now that the tool is available, there is a need to promote it to the industry. This will have to be funded by the VegBIZ project. Consideration should be given to promoting the existence of the VegTool program to service providers, including members of the banking industry. Service providers have requested the program and it is likely many will download it. Their use of the tool with existing and potential clients may be a very effective means of increasing awareness and adoption of the tool.

Finally, it is recommended that the project staff involved in the VegBIZ project consider whether there is a way to evaluate whether the use of the VegTool program improves decision-making by growers and whether there is any evidence that those who use it are likely to make better business decisions.

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Appendix 1

Vegetable Industry Conference Survey Question Responses

Appendix 1

Table 1 : Responses to questions asked of the audience at the end of the VG08004 presentation at the Vegetable Industry Conference in Melbourne, 6th May 2009

Question	Response from the Audience	Scholefield Robinson comment regarding this response
How many are growers?	About ten growers in the audience raised their hands. About 15 others raised their hands to say they worked with growers and would use this kind of tool.	Most of the audience were service providers. The feedback from the few growers was of particular interest.
What was the most attractive feature of the Gross Margin tool?	Simplicity.	These comments came from growers and service providers.
Do you have Excel on the computer that you/they use for the farm?	Growers who are savvy enough to use this model do have Excel. People without Excel wouldn't be interested or able to use a spreadsheet. People without computer skills ask their accountants to do this kind of work for them.	Audience seemed unconcerned about the program being limited to Excel.
Would you feel confident using this program yourself?	Yes.	
Would you prefer to receive the tool on a CD? Would you be willing to download it from the AUSVEG website?	There was a range of responses to this with the majority willing to download it from the website.	Comments were made that being able to download it also made it easier to get updates.
Would you be willing to work on-line so that you didn't need to download the spreadsheets?	Yes > 80% and No < 20%. Some strong feeling that working on-line would enable updates to be provided constantly which was an advantage.	The majority said yes, but were not growers.

Table 2 : Responses to survey questions by individuals given a demonstration of the tool at the AUSVEG stand, Vegetable Industry Conference, Melbourne, 6th May 2009

Question	Sub-question or details of responses	Number of responses and Scholefield Robinson comment regarding this response
What features appeal to you in the new vegetable gross margin calculator?	Save and compare scenarios	3
	Keep cost estimates simple	4
	Express costs and returns per any chosen harvest unit or area unit	2
	Availability of worksheets to calculate costs	4 one of them said: "especially the water worksheet"
Do you have Excel on a computer for the farm?	Yes most growers do. Of Asian growers, about 80% of 1 st generation growers wouldn't. Only 20% would.	Yes - 5 No - 1
Do you use a computer to compare the costs of production of crops that you grow?	Some of my clients do but many don't.	Yes - 2 No - 2

Question	Sub-question or details of responses	Number of responses and Scholefield Robinson comment regarding this response
Do you feel confident trying the program by yourself?	Clients mostly would feel confident to use the spreadsheet.	Yes - 5 No - 0
Do you think comparing the simple gross margins created by this tool could help your decision making?	The comparison page won't be useful to everyone. Most will just want to look quickly at single scenarios (although the comparison page is critical). The GMs will be excellent for short-term crops grown by Vietnamese growers.	Yes - 5 No - 0
How would you like to obtain it? <i>NOTE: some answered yes to more than one option</i>	CD Download from AUSVEG website Use it online	3 6 2
How would you classify yourself?	Grower - 1	Nursery producer or organic grower - 2
	Processor - 1	Researcher - 2
	Consultant - 2	Other service provider - 1
Your Comments	The tool should be translated into Turkish, Iranian, Chinese and Cambodian. Levy payers will benefit most if banks/accountants/advisers/Elders reps all know about it and know how to use it. There is an opportunity to have the tool promoted in the Asian Foods Newsletter in Chinese in the Sept/Oct or July/Aug issue. Add punnets and pots to the list of harvest units.	The tool should be available to market agents so that they can discuss timing and prices and help growers with their decision making. The central markets are all members of the Chamber of F&V Wholesalers. We should give the tool to the Chamber which is now managed by FreshStart and John Roach who nationally coordinates all the Aust F&V markets. As an outlet this is potentially very good. Will use the tool for comparing the cost/benefit potential of innovations in research projects.