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Apple & Pear Australia

# Opinion editorial

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**Darral Ashton, Chairman, Apple and Pear Australia Ltd**

The major political parties want us to either move forward or to stand up for real action. The Australian apple and pear industry wants real action from whoever is in power so the industry can move forward in a vastly changed environment.

We are faced with such threats that an industry worth \$600 million dollars a year could be devastated, which would gut hard working families and communities around the country.

I have been a passionate grower of apples for Australian consumers since the mid 1970s and have been on the board and chairman of my local Batlow fruit cooperative and of the national grower organisation, Apple and Pear Australia Ltd.

Over that time I have seen a lot change, on my own orchard and across the industry. Seasons change from year to year and from decade to decade. Yields and markets fluctuate, within years and between years. The size of orchards has increased and apple varieties that consumers prefer have changed during that time. The list could go on.

Apple and pear growers have absorbed these changes with little outside help. They have been adaptive, innovative and persistent. Australian apple growers supported the breeding program that developed the PINK LADY™ apple and quickly introduced it to their orchards when consumers discovered this wonderful apple. PINK LADY is now the most popular apple in Australia and a standard worldwide.

However, apple and pear growers are now faced with a change that potentially will dwarf all these other changes. That change is the prospect of apples being imported into Australia from China, New Zealand and the United States.

Let me state upfront; we are not concerned about competing with imported apples. Our ability to adapt, innovate and persist is just as strong as ever and if anything, more so. We have been protected in the fresh fruit market to some degree, but importing very cheap apple juice concentrate from China has meant there is no value in second grade fruit, which de facto, has meant Australian apple growers have been exposed to international market forces for some time.

No, we are confident we can, at a reasonable price, produce clean 'green' apples that Australian consumers want.

It is the 'green' part of the equation that we are most concerned about. Our island continent status, along with a strict quarantine regime, has protected us from many damaging and devastating pests and diseases that occur in many other countries.

In the past 15 years, we have more than halved the use of chemicals and there is still a downward trend for chemical use as integrated pest and disease management techniques become more sophisticated.

But if we don't have the right controls in place when we import apples, the hard work done by the industry will be undone. We would have to use more chemicals, the cost of production would rise and we would become one of the pack internationally as far as pest and disease status is concerned.

It would be even more devastating if fire blight were to enter the country. Fire blight, which exists in New Zealand and the United States, is a bacteria and it is controlled using antibiotics sprayed on trees. We do not have any antibiotics registered for use in Australian orchards and it is also not desirable to use them in the environment. Without a chemical control, the disease would spread rapidly with catastrophic consequences, particularly for the more susceptible pear industry.

To protect our environment and its diversity, and to protect farmers, we need to ensure pest and diseases in prospective exporting countries are well understood. If they are not well understood, then research should be conducted into the risk they may cause Australia. We also believe that if knowledge or research does not exist, that should be grounds for holding up the risk assessment process until that work is completed

We also want to ensure that consumers are protected and have full knowledge of their purchases. Protection would mean all imported fruit and vegetable shipments are tested for chemical residues to ensure they comply with Australia's Maximum Residue Levels. Full knowledge of purchases would mean all imported fruit and vegetables are labeled with country of origin and this requirement has a strong legislative backing.

Finally, we believe that given this change has been imposed on growers by the government, the government should support a transition scheme if apple imports impact on Australian apple and pear growers' viability so that growers can either adjust or leave the industry with dignity.

It would be a small price for the community to pay for the disruption that is about to be unleashed on apple and pear growers.

We call on those standing for parliament to support these modest requests.

We feel confident that the community will support our stance as well. We often see letters from consumers stating they do not want to buy apples from China, or asking why are we pushing our own growers out of the market and supporting farmers in other countries, why are we putting our food security at risk and why are we putting our comparative pest and disease freedom at risk?

Candidates supporting our requests would be supporting Australia's farmers and the community.