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Challenging Orange cherry season ends after export, staff and rain issues

- [David Fitzsimons](#)

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ALL HANDS ON DECK: Students played a key role in packing cherries at the BiteRiot shed in Orange. Photo: JUDE KEOGH

Rain storms, a fall in exports to China and a lack of staff played crucial roles in a tough, just-finished cherry harvest in Orange.

However, a flood of tourists from Sydney contributed to the pick-your-own season ending earlier than usual.

BiteRiot's Fiona Hall said their packing shed, which takes fruit from several orchards in the region, finally wound up its 2020-21 operations last Sunday.

It wasn't an incentive for people to go out and pick cherries

Fiona Hall, BiteRiot

She said rain had led to less fruit than usual but the quality was still good this year.

Mrs Hall said the inability of overseas backpackers to pick this year's harvest due to COVID-19 restrictions had led to staff shortages.

She said they employed university and high school students from Sydney and the region.

GOOD CROP: Professional picker Michael Berquist at the Gaeta and Sons Orchard. Photo: JUDE KEOGH

"We had some good locals, but we [also] had some locals who did one day on, one day off [lacking] consistency," she said.

Mrs Hall said they would have struggled to pick all the fruit had the harvest been larger.

"I don't know if there would have been enough labour to get it picked and packed," she said.

Mrs Hall said the government's COVID-relief payments had not helped with the staff shortages.

"It wasn't an incentive for people to go out and pick cherries," she said.

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Mrs Hall said while prices had been good, exports to China had been a challenge due to a lack of flights and politics. "We only did a quarter of what we did [last year]," she said.

Orchards in the region used professional pickers to make up for the backpacker shortage.

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Thornbrook Orchards' Paula Charnock said their pick your own season finished early as plenty of Sydney tourists made up for the lack of usual international visitors.

"We actually finished before Christmas, we had a good season," she said.

Mrs Charnock said there was a lack of coach tours due to COVID concerns but plenty of carloads drove up from Sydney.

She said they sold pick your own cherries for \$7 a kilogram.

Mrs Charnock said they were now turning their attention to stone fruits, including peaches and nectarines, to sell at their farm shed and at markets.

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Apple picking is due to start by the end of February and last until early May.

However, it is not expected the lack of backpackers will be as crucial for apple picking.

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