

Scholar profile: Fiona Hall

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Can the family apple farm survive as production increases, consumption declines, growers' margins decrease and export opportunities become scarcer?

2015 Nuffield Scholar Fiona Hall used her Scholarship to try and identify the best practice from other countries to map out how these practices could address the pressing issues in Australian apple industry in general and the family-owned apple farm in particular.

"Worldwide, 80 million tonnes of apples are grown annually, with China producing almost half of these and New Zealand and Australian apple industries combined contributing to less than 1% of global production," she said.

"This puts into perspective Australia's relatively small-player status in a significant world commodity. However, within Australia we are a significant player, being the highest value fruit industry locally at nearly \$560 million in 2014-15.

"This means that we have great capacity to increase our exports and production, and also to attract the investment that we require, amongst other things, to do so."

Mrs Hall, based at Orange in New South Wales, is the Managing Director of Caernarvon Cherry Co, a holistic cherry growing, packing and marketing operation and co-owner of Bonny Glen Fruits, growing apples over four properties located around Orange and two cold storage properties where they pack market apples for themselves and other growers under their 'BiteRiot' brand.

She received a Nuffield Scholarship supported by Horticulture Australia Limited using voluntary contributions from Apple and Pear Australia Limited and matching funds from the Australian Government.

Mrs Hall said her study of other countries, including New Zealand, Italy, the UK and USA has shown clear areas where change is needed in Australia, including consolidation or specialisation, renewal and succession planning, better marketing and increased investment.

“The Australian apple industry is poised for greater consolidation, as supermarkets limit supplier numbers, as pre-packaging becomes the norm and more food safety legislation is introduced.

“Ethical labour and food traceability require expensive capital expenditure on new technology and new systems.

“I think there will still be smaller, independent growers who serve niche, perhaps organic products or varieties that are not practical or profitable for larger farms to produce. But at the other end of the spectrum will be large, vertically integrated suppliers of year-round products.

“Also, to help break the supermarkets’ stranglehold on the distribution of the fresh produce dollar, Australia needs to increase its share of the export market. This will take an industry-wide effort and possible government support. ”

Fiona says she doesn’t see Australia adapting to a co-operative model, similar to some examples she has seen overseas, but does believe the industry needs to become more open and unified.

“The apple industry needs to cooperate to enable the collection of high-quality data, and to use this data to attract investment.

“It’s impossible to attract investment without the ability to compare horticulture against other assets, but we have been notoriously bad at

capturing this data.

“Australian mindsets to sharing information in our industry makes data collection challenging, so we need to change the mindset as well as the structure (whether cooperative, corporate or single units) to provide a medium to transparently collect the information so we can benchmark within industry.

“This is change that needs to happen urgently to counter diminishing farm-gate returns for Australian apple growers. I think my report offers hope for a bright future if the industry can recognise the risks and act quickly.

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Fiona Hall, from Orange in New South Wales, has been awarded a prestigious Nuffield Scholarship supported by Horticulture Australia Limited using voluntary contributions from Apple and Pear Australia Limited and matching funds from the Australian Government. She will study innovation to close the gap between producer and retailer profits. Fiona...

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