

I see RED

After a prolonged courtroom battle, orchardists in the Nelson/Motueka region have been granted the legal right to cover their crops with red shade cloth.

BRONWYN SAVAGE reports

CONTROVERSIAL red netting will continue its spread over the Tasman District after the Environment Court ruled in orchardists' favour.

Tasman Action Group, a group of Riwaka and Motueka residents, said the bright red cloth, which covers large blocks of land in the Motueka Valley and Lower Moutere, was an eyesore and was concerned that large areas of the district would become covered.

The group took several orchardists and the Tasman District Council to court. The group said the council had not fulfilled its requirements under the Resource

Management Act to protect the rural environment and that it did not uphold the rules by allowing orchardists to erect the red cloth, with only a building consent and not resource consent.

The Environment Court ruled against the group and said the cloth could not be construed as harmful to the environment, and that the council was correct in not requiring resource consents.

Chris Drummond of Fairfield orchard uses the bright red netting as element protection for his high-value apple varieties.

He said it created a better growing environment and he gets a 10% increase on his

packout because of it. The bright red colour is thought to enhance the red colour of fruit.

Most orchardists put the netting on high-value crops only.

"There's probably a two-year payback on putting it up, with your savings in hail insurance and your better packouts.

"If you had a variety that wasn't paying very well it probably wouldn't be economic do to it."

Mr Drummond was surprised the dispute between orchardists and the Tasman Action Group headed to the Environment Court, but he thought the ruling was a win for the



HortShorts

Strength in numbers: More than 400 grower/shareholders attended the Zespri AGM in July to review the kiwifruit industry's 2006-07 performance and celebrate 10 years of the Zespri brand. In just a decade, the industry has doubled its sales by value, achieved significant growth in volume, delivered a 77% increase in net return per tray and more than doubled orchard gate return per hectare. Zespri chairman Craig Greenlees says success is attributed to the company's structure. "We have the strongest industry platform, in terms of unity, that we have ever had."

Returns down: The high value of the \$NZ is driving kiwifruit grower returns down, say Zespri. The soaring exchange rate is believed to have cost the industry \$140 million, said the company. At Zespri's recent AGM, chairman Craig Greenlees warned growers the situation was unlikely to improve in the foreseeable future. "With the high \$NZ and with our constant demands for higher and more consistent quality, 2007-08 is set to be even more challenging than the season just past."

Solid Outcome: More than 600 people attended the Horticulture New Zealand 2007 conference in Christchurch in late July/early August. International speakers covered subjects including international marketing, trends in food production and supply, succession planning and communicating to younger generations.

To open the event, HortNZ president Andrew Fenton challenged Agriculture Minister Jim Anderton on subjects such as seasonal labour shortages and the exchange rate. In his address, the minister said he would continue to discuss this in Parliament.

Cool labelling: In early August, MP Sue Kedgley and the Green Party launched their "single food component" CoOL labelling petition. The Pukekohe Vegetable Growers' Association also made a call at the HortNZ conference to make CoOL labelling mandatory for all imported food.

Organic best: Consumers choose organic food and drinks for the taste, as well as because they are better for the environment and being perceived as safer for consumers, according to University of Otago research conducted on behalf of Organics Aotearoa New Zealand (OANZ). "There is strong consumer sentiment for food that is GE free, contains only natural ingredients and is free from antibiotics, hormones and chemicals" said Associate Professor Hugh Campbell. He is director of the Centre for the Study of Agriculture, Food and Environment at the University of Otago, which released the results of his survey at the national Organic Sector Conference.

SIMPLY RED: Red netting spread over orchards around Riwaka. This view shows around 20ha covered by the cloth.

productive side of the district.

"We're told to innovate and promote our exports, but then these people who move out of town up on to the hill decide they don't want us to do it because of their view."

He said many orchardists do not like houses stuck along the top of the ridge, but they are not campaigning about that.

"It's all a matter of perception."

Tasman Action Group spokesperson Jane Wickham said the group would not appeal the Environment Court's decision; instead they would look to the upcoming Tasman District Council elections to highlight the issue.

"The group was very disappointed the judge didn't see it our way. We thought we put up a good argument."

Ms Wickham was disappointed the judge did not physically view the nets before making a decision and said people had to see the red with their own eyes before pass-

ing judgment on who was right and who was wrong.

"Anybody who hasn't seen them wonders what on earth we're talking about. They wonder what the big deal is, but when they see them they understand."

The group's main concern was that the red netting had the potential to spread over the entire Waimea Plains, Coastal Highway and Tasman grape growing regions.

"There is absolutely no restriction on colour or size of netting that can be put up.

"People should bear that in mind when they see the 20ha covered in Riwaka."

Inglis Horticulture has put up around 15 to 20ha of red shade cloth over its 140ha of apple trees and was one of the orchards taken to court.

General manager Richard Inglis said the orchard was still getting things organised after the decision and did not wish to comment to the media at this early stage.

The bloody facts about red netting

- The bright red netting is used to protect from hail damage, sunburn and strong winds.
- It creates a better, protected, growing environment, similar to a greenhouse.
- It can increase yield, up to a 10% improvement on packouts.
- The affect the bright red cloth has on fruit colour has not yet been proven, but it is based on research done in Israel. The light wavelength that comes through the red cloth is thought to enhance the red colour of fruit.
- Most orchards put the netting on high-value apple and pear crops only, because the high cost of hail insurance makes it well worth it.
- A variety of coloured netting is available.