

# Hail batters district

By GEORGIA DONOVAN

THEY knew it was coming, but didn't realise its intensity, and all the Whitfort's could do was sit and watch the storm devastate their farm.

Hail stones reaching the size of oranges rattled the Whitfort's Catspaw Farm Winery during the storm on Tuesday afternoon, which damaged properties at Greenlands, Amiens and Pozieres.

Cracked windows, leaks and broken furniture are the least of the Whitfort's problems, with the 20-minute hailstorm causing damage to 100 per cent of their fruit crops.

Surveying her battered 4-hectare apple orchard, Leonie Whitfort predicted the fruit that had managed to stay in tact "wouldn't be enough to worry about."

Leonie said they managed to salvage fruit after a less-severe storm last week, however Tuesday's storm had destroyed any hope of a harvest this season.

"There'll be no fruit this year," she said, meaning the winery won't produce a vintage next year.

"The young trees from the last bad storm had only just started to recover. Last week wasn't as bad but it did cause damage," she said.

Leonie said their next season of fruit would be affected by the damage to the crops, to what extent though was still unknown.

Despite their massive loss, Leonie managed to keep a positive stance.

"I'm laughing but if I wasn't I'd probably be crying. There's nothing I can do, it's just one of the joys of farming," she said.

"We are very disappointed but we

take the attitude that we have to get on with our life."

Leonie admitted they had toyed with the idea of installing hail nets, but she suspected the nets wouldn't have had a chance against the ferocity of Tuesday's storm.

"You can try and minimise losses with hail nets, but you're faced with a big expense. As farmers you have to weigh up whether it's worth taking the risk from time to time," she said.

The Whitfort's will now begin the task of spraying their orchard and vineyard to prevent fungal and bacterial diseases from infiltrating the stems and wounds of the remaining fruit.

Fellow fruit grower Bruno Stefanon at Pozieres escaped major damage to his farm, which he firmly attributes to his hail nets.

Mr Stefanon received golf ball-sized hail during the storm however nets covering 80 per cent of his farm ensured very minimal damage to his fruit.

Mr Stefanon reported damage to about half of his apple produce that wasn't shielded by nets.

Amiens winery Robert Channon Wines reported hail the size of large marbles on Tuesday for around half an hour, accompanied by very strong wind.

Winery owner Robert Channon said his hail nets were turned into "beautiful, white hammocks" and prevented any damage to his grapes.

Despite affecting other orchards in Amiens, the Harslett's farm at Amiens revealed they were "all smiles" and reported no hail when contacted yesterday.



ABOVE: The Whitfort's bush house created a canopy for the hail stones during Tuesday's storm.

INSET: Hail stones up to the size of oranges covered the Whitfort's property. Pictures supplied