

NATIONAL

Sunblotch isn't here: exports to Aust safe

By JON MORGAN - BusinessDay Last updated 05:00 02/11/2009

It is the disease that was not there. The avocado industry has crossed the sunblotch viroid off its list of diseases and saved its \$30 million trade with Australia.

The viroid has never been seen in New Zealand avocado orchards or nurseries since it was first picked up in laboratory testing in 1993. "We came to the conclusion that the original technicians had made a mistake, that their samples had been contaminated," Avocado Association chief executive Alan Thorn said.

The viroid was endemic throughout all avocado-producing countries and it had not mattered that it was thought to be in New Zealand.

But that had changed recently with parts of Australia moving to declare themselves free of it so they could use this status to keep out imported Chilean avocados.

New Zealand's growers were concerned valuable Australian trade, two-thirds of all avocado exports, would be caught up in any dispute and moved to clarify their status.

The association asked Biosecurity NZ to go back to the 32 orchards it had originally declared had the disease and look again.

It took five years. First, a panel of international experts had to develop a testing and sampling protocol and then more than 8000 samples were collected and tested. Finally, last week, Biosecurity NZ declared New Zealand free of the disease.

Thorn said the Australian industry had told him the New Zealand science was rock solid and would be accepted. "They said: 'If you say you haven't got it, it's not an issue for us.'"

New Zealand hopes to increase the Australian market to \$50m in three to five years.