

Drought shrivels North pay packets

Mike Barrington | 19th January 2010



Maunu avocado grower Terry Powell in his orchard, where trees were knocked around by wet and windy weather over the past two seasons and are now enduring a drought.

Drought conditions are dealing a multimillion-dollar blow to Northland's agriculture and horticulture sectors.

Dairy farmers and some avocado growers are seeing their incomes shrivel.

The Government is likely to declare Northland an official drought zone, and open the door for official relief this week.

Northland Rural Support Trust co-ordinator Helen Moodie said Northland's economy had lost millions of dollars with dairy farmers particularly affected by shrinking milk cheques and wilting crops.

She said the challenge now was to minimise costs.

Some drought-hit Northland avocado growers are seeing potentially lucrative fruit drop on the ground.

Northland growers are about two-thirds through their 2009-10 harvest, which so far has met expectations with export prices the best for many seasons.

But with the dry weather, stressed trees are dropping their fruit and - even with irrigation - fruit size is not increasing much and sunburn is taking its toll.

Maungatapere orchardist and Avocado Growers' Association regional representative Mike Eagles said growers under most pressure were those whose trees had taken severe knocks in winter storms over the past two seasons.

"There's a few stressed-out people around," he said.

One is Terry Powell, whose 4.5ha of unirrigated 25-year-old avocado trees at Maunu lost fruit in high winds in the past two seasons and the September cold snaps last year caused poor fruit set. The sun is ripening fruit on his best trees or turning the avocados blotchy with sunburn, while some trees are yellow with root disease caused by the past wet winters.

"It's really disheartening," he said.

Mr Powell is a former avocado packhouse owner who grows organically for the domestic market. One grower he knows bought an orchard for \$1million three years ago, but both he and his wife now had jobs to pay their mortgage.

A former dairy farmer who had bought an orchard was milking cows for someone else to make ends meet, he said.

Agricultural climatologist at Niwa Alan Porteous said the "serious situation" in Northland was caused by the El Nino weather pattern - which typically brings higher than normal pressure in the north of the North Island - which is likely to continue for the rest of the summer.

Typically, from November to mid-January, Whangarei could expect 216mm in rain but it only received 78mm. Kerikeri had 31mm instead of 295mm and Kaitaia had 48mm instead of 216mm.

Ohaeawai recorded 53mm instead of 248mm and Dargaville 59mm instead of 198mm.