

Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Trade and Investment Growth

Inquiry: Creating Sustainable Economic Growth in Rural and Regional Australia

Submitted by: Fruit Growers Victoria Ltd

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Industry Focus: Australian Pome and Stone Fruit Industry

Introduction

This submission highlights the critical role of the Australian pome and stone fruit industry in driving sustainable economic growth across rural and regional Australia. The industry is a cornerstone of regional employment, a key source of export earnings, and a vital contributor to Australia's global reputation for producing high-quality, clean, and environmentally responsible fruit. We welcome the Committee's focus on marketing, branding, certification, and tourism alignment as essential strategies to enhance regional economies and showcase Australia's agricultural excellence.

Global demand and competitive pressures

The Australian pome and stone fruit industries are well-positioned to capitalise on growing global consumer demand for safe, fresh, and sustainably grown produce. However, several challenges and opportunities must be addressed to maximise this potential. One significant challenge is the comparatively high labour costs in Australia, especially when compared to major competitors such as South Africa. Additionally, rising airfreight expenses to key markets such as China and Southeast Asia reduce export profitability.

Marketing and export promotion strategies

To overcome these challenges, greater investment in coordinated, nationally driven marketing campaigns is needed to position Australian-grown fruit as premium, safe, and sustainably produced, targeting both export and domestic markets. Key export destinations for apples include China, Southeast Asia, India, and the Middle East, while pears find strong markets in New Zealand, Singapore, Canada (British Columbia), and Thailand. Building on the success of the Export Market Development Grants (EMDG) program, additional small grants should be made available to enable growers to participate in trade shows such as Asia Fruit Logistica. This would foster importer relationships and expand valuable networks.

Strengthening domestic market campaigns

Domestically, increased funding is necessary to promote campaigns that highlight messages such as "Australian Grown" and "Healthier Fruits." Introducing such initiatives into school curricula, particularly at the primary level, would encourage young Australians to develop a preference for locally produced fruit. Similarly, targeted marketing efforts aimed at older demographics could boost consumption among the aging population by emphasising health

benefits and cultural preferences. Regional and state-based growers and grower associations should have direct access to marketing levy funds to support domestic promotional activities and seasonal launch events - such as the popular Victorian "Cherry Trails".

Government support

Policies that protect local production from imported fruit, particularly canned or processed products, are also essential. Supermarkets could play a stronger role by differentiating 'Australian-grown' produce through dedicated promotions and shelf branding. Government support remains critical to securing and expanding market access. This includes negotiating trade agreements and export protocols that facilitate the timely shipment of fresh fruit. Subsidies for airfreight, especially to China and Southeast Asia, would significantly assist exporters, including better utilisation of passenger airline cargo space. Furthermore, centralising audit processes for farms producing multiple fruit varieties and coordinating inspections simultaneously could reduce costs and administrative burdens. Recent government trade agreements, such as the new deal allowing Australian apples to enter Canada, demonstrate the benefits of these efforts and should serve as a model for expanding access to other markets.

Branding, certification, and premium market access

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in the pome and stone fruit sectors can greatly benefit from stronger branding and certification frameworks that build consumer confidence and open premium markets. Promoting region-specific branding, such as "Goulburn Valley Apples" leverages the unique provenance of fruit-growing regions to foster premium positioning both domestically and internationally. Expanding programs that assist growers in obtaining third-party certifications such as Freshcare, GLOBALG.A.P., and organic accreditation is increasingly important, as international buyers place growing emphasis on environmental stewardship and ethical production. Investment in innovative labelling technologies, including QR codes and blockchain-enabled traceability systems, would help combat product counterfeiting and reinforce consumer trust. Additionally, grants and advisory services focused on enhancing marketing capabilities, facilitating engagement with export consultants, and supporting the development of bilingual packaging and promotional materials tailored to target markets would further empower SMEs.

Agri-tourism and regional experience development

Agri-tourism represents a valuable opportunity to diversify income streams for growers and strengthen connections with domestic and international visitors. Supporting on-farm experiences such as "pick-your-own" orchards, farm-gate tastings, seasonal festivals, and educational tours, particularly in fruit-producing regions like the Goulburn Valley and the Yarra Valley would enhance visitor engagement. Furthermore, fostering collaborations among growers, local hospitality businesses, and tourism agencies to develop branded food trails and itineraries that integrate fruit-focused experiences alongside wine tasting, and cheese sampling would amplify regional economic benefits.

We appreciate the Committee's consideration of these recommendations to unlock the full potential of Australia's pome and stone fruit industries in supporting vibrant rural and regional communities.