



Cherry harvest on for Young and old

By Stephanie Anderson

There's barely a cloud in the skies above Young and at 10am the heat has already started to set in across the hills.

It's weather that encourages a snooze in the shade but with 22,000 trees to attend to, cherry grower Scott Coupland has no chance to rest.

The NSW Cherry Growers president has been up for hours, checking on pickers as they work their way through a bumper harvest larger in both fruit size and quantity than last year.

"Last year I suppose you could call a disaster," Mr Coupland said.

"The fruit didn't reach fruit size. It actually stopped growing because there was no moisture in the ground. We probably picked around 25, 30 per cent of what we should have picked. [This year] the rain probably spoiled a couple of varieties. It's OK, we'll get fruit out of it. We've lost some, but it's a benefit for others."

This year's harvest at Young, two hours north-west of Canberra, has only just started and Mr Coupland has already taken on 30 pickers.

Dozens more will start in the coming weeks as retirees,

backpackers and students converge on the district for seasonal work.

"People come and work for me and they can save three to four thousand dollars," Mr Coupland said.

"As far as pickers go, they get paid for what they do. Good pickers will make probably a little better than wages at the start of the season and they make very good money going into the last half of the season.

"They're not like the old ones. I was talking to one of the fellas the other day in the local shop and he said, 'We miss some of the old pickers'. He said he knew once they came here, everything they made would stay. They'd leave town with nothing."

While the new breed of pickers may not be spending all their wages at the local pub, Mr Coupland said the expected influx of 3000 workers would see the benefits of the bumper season spread throughout the town.

"They'll have the capacity to earn good money and a fair bit of that money will be spent in town," he said. "It's coming up to Christmas and Christmas shopping, so the town really benefits and the town really

needs it from them."

The harvest will also bring good news for cherry-loving Canberrans.

Mr Coupland said that while wholesale cherry prices were currently about \$15 a kilo, they would scale back as the season progressed. "Early season prices are always high, but as the season gets going and there's more fruit out there it kind of comes back," he said.

The season will also benefit the growing export market.

"We've just had the Taiwanese market reopened - that's taken a few years to get," Mr Coupland said.

"We're hoping for more access into China in the next couple of years as well. They love cherries over in China - they're right into that sort of thing."

Its popularity could also be boosted by the recently issued *Australian Cherry Report*, which says the fruit may offer protection against heart disease and reduce the risk of diabetes. The harvest will continue into the new year as growers work through Young's National Cherry Festival on December 3 to 5.



TEMPTING FRUIT: Grower Scott Coupland on his property near Young. He says this season's cherries are larger and of better quality than last year. Photo: LANNON HARLEY