

Psa impact seared into the mind



Robbie (right) and Scott Ellison.

It arrived like a whisper but fast turned into a scream. Psa was first identified in New Zealand 10 years ago and what followed was one of the most tumultuous times in the history of the kiwifruit industry. Now Kiwifruit Vine Health has commissioned a project which follows some of the main players from those early days of Psa and tells their stories. The following are excerpts from two such tales, as told to local writers **Sue Hoffart** and **Elaine Fisher**.

Robbie Ellison – family feels

Several moments from the Psa saga stand like vivid mental photographs in Robbie Ellison's memory.

The first occurred about 8pm on Sunday night, November 7, two days after the orchardist and his wife Karen returned from a European holiday. While overseas, their plans to visit Italian kiwifruit orchards were curtailed by the rampant spread of a bacterial infection that was creating havoc within the industry.

Robbie was glad to be home and pleased to see healthy vines as he spent the weekend catching up on spraying. The orchardist wasn't thinking about Psa though, he had succession planning on his mind. He wondered how he might step back further from involvement in 18 hectares of kiwifruit and perhaps begin to divvy up ownership of four Te Puke properties amongst the couple's three sons Trent, Scott and Sam. Two were already working in the business full time, while Scotty divided his seasons between

international skifield work and kiwifruit.

Light was fading as Robbie drove past the Zespri building that Sunday evening, en route to his Mount Maunganui house. But he recognised the two figures standing, talking earnestly outside the marketing co-operative's head office. What on earth, he wondered with some trepidation, were New Zealand Kiwifruit Growers Incorporated chair Pete Omble and Zespri chief executive Lain Jager doing there at that time of night?



“The next morning, I was driving to work and the phone goes. It was a Katikoti grower and he says ‘Psa’s in New Zealand’. That’s the first thing he said.”

“You just know something big is going down” Robbie says of this, thinking back then.

“The next morning, I was driving to work and the phone goes. It was a Katikoti grower and he says ‘Psa’s in New Zealand’. That’s the first thing he said. Not hello. I know exactly where I was at the time, halfway along the swamp road between Te Puke and Welcome Bay. I thought, ‘bloody hell!’”

Robbie drove straight to Trevelyan’s pack-house and quizzed the first person he found. Where is this Psa thing, he wanted to know. Is it Kerikeri? Gisborne? The reply was a hammer blow; the infected property lay 200m from two of the Ellison’s four Te Puke orchards.

By Wednesday, son Sam had found strange little angular spots on Hort16A leaves at their Brown Road place, downwind of Olympos orchard. Within days, the spotting had spread through numerous male plants and some of the females.

While there were plenty of unanswered questions, from the outset Robbie was

in no doubt the issue was serious. Craig Thompson, now at Zespri, was a family friend and the two men had spoken about the devastation Psa was causing in Italy, where Craig had lived and worked. Robbie expected things were going to get tough for gold growers. In his case, 30 percent of his holdings were Hort16A.

Sure enough, Robbie and Sam’s suspicions were quickly confirmed; an inspection revealed one gold block at Brown Road looked okay but the second was certainly infected. The orchard stood directly in the path of the prevailing wind.

What’s more, symptoms had also appeared on the first-year canopy along the front block of the Ellisons’ Red Fox orchard, on Te Matai Road.

Several months of uncertainty followed before instruction came in February 2011 to cut down the problematic Te Matai Road vines, below the graft, to knee height.

The Brown Road place had a stay of execution. For 10 labour-intensive months, the family and their staff battled to save the vines, harvesting a crop, embarking on

winter pruning and constantly cutting out any leaders that showed signs of dieback or ooze.

“That was a big mistake, it was obvious as soon as we got to bud burst, and we ended up cutting it off in September anyway. We should have taken the crop off and cut it off straight away but we weren’t sure.”

Sons Trent and Sam wielded chainsaws to bring down the vines. Then, just as they were finishing, they walked into the next block and found 22 of the 23 vines showing symptoms. So they kept cutting until all 1.1 hectares of gold had gone.

Robbie describes the first tell-tale cankers he saw, like pus-filled wounds dripping with red exudate. In those days, the sound of chainsaws roared through his place and on his neighbours’ orchards. Road frontages were frequently pocked with piles of vine-filled plastic bags along orchard frontages.

It was an awful time, he says, and the uncertainty was far from over. Would they lose the remaining gold block at Te Matai Road the following season? How long before Psa hit their other two properties?



What about the green? He held grave fears for the remaining 70% of his crop and wondered, could he and his family lose everything?

"There was a point when I thought 'hell, we could lose all this. I might not have anything to transfer to my sons."

On Red Fox orchard, the green was saved from destruction by a last-minute policy change. A contractor was lined up to cull the vines on the Monday morning until an announcement on the previous Friday afternoon deemed the infected green could stay. Those particular vines produced fruit for another decade and were only recently cut to make way for Zespri Red.

He says the initial scramble for information and guidance was difficult for everyone and it became obvious that no-one was properly prepared for a horticultural biosecurity incursion.

"We had meat inspectors inspecting our orchards," he says, of the early response from the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF).

"In those first six months, you could - and some growers did - feel some resentment towards people higher up in industry. In their defence, we had never come up against something like this. It was difficult for decision makers. It was hard for Zespri, being the marketing arm. We had some real holes in our on-orchard biosecurity." He is certain the formation of Kiwifruit Vine Health (KVH) has been key to managing the initial Psa crisis and ongoing issues with the bacteria, as well as addressing future threats such as brown marmorated stink bug and Queensland Fruit Fly.

"The industry is without doubt better set up, we've got a better of chance handling these things well now. Once Psa was under control, so to speak, there was some question about the need for an organisation like KVH. But clearly there is very much still a role for them."

"In my mind we will have future biosecurity breaches and we will need to handle those with a coordinated approach."

Positivity paved the way

Robbie Ellison is a natural optimist who looks for silver linings, like the resilience learned and the fact that plummeting orchard prices allowed son Trent to buy into the market at a great price.

But he does not minimise the extent of the crisis.

"In our community, it wasn't just us growers that were worried, it was our orchard employees, our packhouse employees and the wider community because Te Puke is quite dependent on the kiwifruit industry."

Robbie is adamant that getting away from the orchard is the key to maintaining decent mental health. It's a lesson the orchardist has taken to heart himself and one his sons instinctively knew to follow during the Psa outbreak. He repeated the same message to others who were struggling to cope with the financial uncertainty and devastation inflicted by the bacteria.

In his case, he claims fishing and a daily



café ritual have helped him deal with adversity and says the act of offering help to others hasn't hurt, either. Robbie was among a small team who travelled to other kiwifruit regions, to speak at grower support meetings. Avoid blaming others and focus energy on dealing with the task at hand, he advised. And make mental wellbeing a priority.

Forty years in horticulture and some brutally bad seasons have taught Robbie how to withstand knocks. He remains philosophical about future threats, including the effects Covid-19 may have on his business.

"At the moment we're looking good but it's an uncertain world. That's part and parcel of being a grower. We face uncertainty. Are we going to get through without a frost or hailstorm? How is Covid-19 going to affect demand for our fruit?"

"Since Psa, this orchard has been hailed twice in consecutive seasons," he says, nodding his chin beyond the rows of Zespri Red that form part of his Red Fox orchard. "Both times it cost quite a bit of crop but that's the sort of thing that can happen when you're a grower and you've just got

to put your head down. You learn skills to be able to cope with this stuff, actually being aware of your mental health, getting off the orchard. It's not the fact that things happen, it's how you deal with them that matters."

Karen Roche – Psa a small-town hammer blow

In shock value terms, Katikati packhouse boss Karen Roche rates the arrival of a horticultural bacteria alongside an unforgettable royal death.

The Birchwood General Manager likens Psa's appearance in the Bay of Plenty to news that the Princess of Wales had died in a car crash 13 years earlier.

"I remember where I was when Lady Diana died and it was a bit like that," Karen says of the day she learned a Te Puke orchard had been struck by the virus.

"It was around five in the evening and my grower services manager Jane Wordley and I were still here at work when we heard. We were thinking, what the hell? How could it possibly get here? I've got a little fridge in the office where we keep wine, usually for grower events and well, we sat



down with a glass of wine."

That night, Karen and her colleague started out the way they would continue; they made a plan and began phoning their orchard managers to share the scant information on hand.

Over the ensuing days, they set to work trying to deal with immediate fears and practicalities and all the questions they couldn't properly answer. Would it be as bad as the stories emerging from Italy?



“ We battled that attitude for a long, long time. Even when they got Psa, there was denial. They didn't really believe it, they'd say 'it's just spotting, I've seen that before' . ”

Would the industry survive? Would anyone keep their jobs? And where on earth did a person find disposable overalls in extra-large sizes?

“All of a sudden, there were all these hygiene considerations. Once we started sending our people out to monitor orchards, we had the whole exercise of trying to find these white suits, what to use and of course we've got all kinds of body shapes needing them. We had to source sanitising gear for tools, stuff for hands, foot baths, the list went on and on. The contractors who were going onto the orchard had to do a clean-up spray of their gear. Growers didn't always have hoses or water where it was needed, so you had to find a water source. Everything took longer.

“Later, when we picked and packed, we were advised to sanitise the picking bags on and off the orchard, to only use picking gloves once on an orchard. We were going through all these picking gloves. We had to supply the tractor drivers with brushes so there was no plant material on the tractor or bins and that meant another 15 minutes when you got to work and half an hour at the end. We were washing down

equipment and not letting vehicles onto the orchard.

“We did all that but still we got it. Usually after a massive wind, you'd see it had sneaked into somewhere that had some shelter trees down. It was a beast of a thing.”

When Psa landed in Karen's lap, she was three years into the role and still learning, with 10 full time staff and 50 supplier orchards, centred around the Katikati district. While it was her years of administrative and other industry experience that won her the job, she swears it is parenthood that best prepared her to manage the packhouse and tackle the Psa fallout. The mother of three – one unexpected set of twins and a child with a disability – says running a post harvest operation is much like looking after a busy family.

“You're juggling lots of balls, exactly like when you have kids going to three different sports events and you've got to have a plate for one. In the packhouse, being a mother helped me more than anything else. And staff squabbles are just like dealing with fighting kids.”

Her workplace family was fearful of the job losses that initially looked inevitable as the industry battled the bacteria, and Karen worked hard to reassure them. She was doing the same thing each time she visited town and found herself talking to worried store owners and managers who would quiz her about Psa and its progress, fearing for their livelihoods and employees.

“They were scared. Katikati is a very small town so the shopkeepers were totally reliant on kiwifruit and a booming kiwifruit industry. The poor townspeople, every time I'd go into town they'd say, what do you know?”

Growers were frightened, too, and plenty resisted the hygiene precautions, adamant it would never reach their orchards in Katikati or Waihi.

“We battled that attitude for a long, long time. Even when they got Psa, there was denial. They didn't really believe it, they'd say 'it's just spotting, I've seen that before'. The growers who had been in denial were the ones hit hardest mentally.

“But at Birchwood, we knew it was inevitable. If it had got to Te Puke from overseas, it was blinking going to get here.

“In the early times, I really did think there’s got to be a silver bullet, they’ll find this magic spray, but we finally figured that was not going to happen. We were going to have to live with it.”



We did get some grace in that we were fortunate to be able to observe what was happening in Te Puke and we wanted to front foot it. We wanted to be prepared.”

Karen says Zespri’s Canopy website was a godsend, providing constantly-updated information. Later, it was support from Kiwifruit Vine Health (KVH) and New Zealand Kiwifruit Growers Incorporated (NZKGI) that made her feel less alone and better informed. Both Karen and Jane dispatched constant updates to growers and regularly gathered staff to share news in-between attending a seemingly endless stream of meetings.

“That’s what I remember, the meetings. Lots of miles, lots of late nights. All the phone calls and newsletters. Those newsletters were hard. I’m more operations and financials but all of a sudden I was having to become an expert wordsmith to get the information out there.

“The more information we got, the more we realised how little we knew. We were just flying by the seat of our pants, hoping whatever product we were using was right. Often it wasn’t and we had to say, ‘they’re not recommending that anymore’ and change what we were doing.”

Informality the key

Jane and Karen implemented a weekly Tuesday afternoon catch-up session, where

growers were invited to meet informally with staff, over a glass of beer or wine. Professional counsellors were also brought in to help both staff and growers cope.

“I remember one of the things they said was how to sleep at night. They were giving us tools to switch off when your brain is going 100 miles an hour. That was me. I’d be running over everything I’d been doing during the day. Now, did I do that? Did I organise that? Did I let them know? Have I missed something? For me, the answer was having a piece of the paper by the bed, to write it all down. Lists, always lists.”

Both Karen and her orchard services manager had a personal stake in finding the best ways to manage the bacteria. Jane and her husband had signed a deal to buy a 4-hectare orchard planted in green and gold, with settlement day falling just 24 hours after the Psa announcement. Karen and her husband also owned an orchard.

“We had green and Gold9 but we didn’t know it would be okay so we made a plan. When Psa decimated it, we were going to make it into a golf driving range. Or maybe blueberries. That’s how we were thinking early on.”

By the time the infection reached the Katikati area, Psa was better understood and there were glimmers of hope on the horizon. It was becoming clear that Hort16A gold vines were harder hit than

green and it looked likely the industry might weather the storm. Karen and her team continued to devour information, trying to advise growers on the best approach, advising they strike early and prepare for the worst; book contractors quickly, bring a digger in to ensure there was a hole ready to bury any infected vines.

“It was a continual learning curve. I remember vividly we blowtorched some Psa and burnt it. Everyone was trying different things and we had to be continually telling growers, don’t listen to those snake oil people. In the early times, I really did think there’s got to be a silver bullet, they’ll find this magic spray, but we finally figured that was not going to happen. We were going to have to live with it.”

And it wasn’t all bad. She recalls the strong sense of camaraderie and support between everyone from the Zespri chief executive down.

What’s more, Karen admits Psa did have one upside.

“It gave us Gold3. Hort16A was horrible to pick and pack because it had a beak. That was a problem if you mishandled it, it got a little cut. Even packing, it was really hard to stop that physical damage. And Gold3 is such a beautiful fruit to pack. It’s even, it doesn’t get that blemish.” ■