



Partnership: Wakefield Transport proprietor Ken Wakefield, Peter Crisp, Murray Valley Citrus Board chair John Tesoriero, and Perry Hills, stepped inside the -0.5 degree cold of one of Wakefield's big cool rooms yesterday to check chilled table grapes destined for export to Asia. Picture: Luke Birch

Exports boost

Chilling on the fly cools export costs

By Graeme O'Neill

WAKEFIELD Transport in Merbein is installing a \$920,000 rapid-chill facility that will save Sunraysia citrus and table-grape growers \$2 to \$3 million a year from the cost of ensuring fruit exported to Asian markets is free of fruit fly.

Multiple outbreaks of Queensland fruit fly over the past few years cost the local citrus industry an estimated \$3 million to freight mandarin and navel orange shipments bound for China and south-east Asian markets to a rapid-chill disinfestation facility in Shepparton.

Stringent protocols apply to fruit shipped to Asian markets, that ensure Australian fruit is free from Qfly — one of the world's most destructive insect pests.

Member for Mildura Peter Crisp announced the development at a media conference at Wakefield's Merbein headquarters yesterday.

The German and Italian-made components for the big cool room are still on the way to Australia, but Wakefield Transport proprie-

tor Ken Wakefield said it would be completed in time for the winter navel orange season.

Mr Crisp said the facility was designed to rapidly chill pallets of boxed oranges or table grapes to disinfestation temperature, while maintaining a humid atmosphere to prevent fruit losing moisture and going soft.

The chilled fruit must be held at a temperature lower than 2 degrees Celsius for at least two weeks to ensure all fruit fly and their larvae are killed during the two to three-week transit time by ship from Melbourne to Asian ports.

Mr Crisp said humidity was essential to maintain fruit quality during rapid chilling.

Conventional refrigerated cool rooms produce relatively dry, cold air currents that chill shipments unevenly.

Mr Crisp said the new facility was an example of the benefits of collaboration between industry, business and government.

The Mildura Development Corporation had been instrumental in securing a \$470,000 grant from the Victorian Govern-

ment's Regional Growth Fund.

Wakefields had contributed \$300,000, while the Mildura Fruit Company had invested \$150,000.

Mr Wakefield said the new disinfestation facility will be able to rapidly chill two lots of 60 pallets of boxed fruit per day to disinfestation temperature — enough to fill eight containers.

Export protocols for China and other export markets stipulate that fruit cannot be loaded for shipment until the entire consignment has been chilled to the correct disinfestation temperature; the faster the chill, the earlier the fruit can be exported to arrive in peak condition.

Mildura Fruit Company general manager Perry Hills said that with the high Australian dollar, unavoidable increases in production costs, competition from other fruit-exporting nations like South Africa and Chile, the citrus and table grape industries had to pursue all potential savings — even a marginal saving of \$1 on the cost of freighting citrus to Shepparton for disinfestation could make a difference to a grower's bottom line.