

## Firm thumbs up for IQ tester

A fruit firmness testing system developed in the UK has been hailed as 'the saviour of the avocado world' by a leading avocado supplier in the US.

At the forefront of avocado handling, packaging and distribution in the US retail and food service market, Mission is leading the way in the avocado industry's fastest growing sector – ripe and ready fruit.

Committed to providing ripe, ready-to-eat avocados tailored for retail stores and consumers, Mission started working with Sinclair iQ, a division of international labelling company Sinclair International, on innovative ripening programmes for major retail customers in 2001.

Norwich-based fruit testing technology specialist Sinclair iQ developed the SIQ-FT (Sinclair Internal Quality – Firmness Tester) for use by fruit distributors and packhouses worldwide. The SIQ-FT is a non-destructive high speed system for measuring the firmness of every individual fruit online to predict ripeness levels.

Mission has now installed SIQ-FT systems at its main plant in Oxnard, California together with four other strategic ripening centres in Denver, Chicago, Vineland NJ and Atlanta. Each facility houses ripening rooms where air flow, temperature and humidity are computer monitored. Ripe fruit is sorted online by the SIQ-FT, which measures and precisely separates avocados according to firmness readings. Avocados are then boxed so that each piece of fruit in any given carton is within the same firmness band.

Mission Produce president and CEO Steve Barnard said: "We've been developing our ripe programs for several years and have tested a number of different types of technology. We're confident that with the SIQ-FT, we have found the best firmness testing technology on the market today."



"Sinclair's firmness testing system sorts every avocado according to ripeness and enables us to provide consistent quality fruit, which allows retailers to derive 100 per cent utilisation. Our customers are very excited and are seeing sales numbers they have never seen before.

"There is no doubt it has made a huge impact on our business and has increased volumes substantially. We have an absolute belief in the system and know it works."

Mission plans to invest in further SIQ-FT systems as it continues to increase business and grow volumes within its ripening centres. Mission currently handles avocados from more than 1,000 US growers, totalling in the region of 10,000 acres. The Hass variety represents around 90 per cent of the total volume of fruit handled.

Barnard says: "Our main focus for the future is to increase consumption of avocados. Supplying perfectly ripe fruit plays a big part in driving consumer momentum. Consumers have to be confident that they can go into the store on any day and pick up a ripe avocado to take home and eat.

"We're confident that the combination of Sinclair's technology and our expertise will ensure continued growth in the supply of ripe

The worldwide market for ready-to-eat avocados has grown rapidly in the last two years and research by Mission shows ripe avocados now outsell hard fruit by almost four to one.

Mission developed its ripe programmes to help customers sell more avocados and increase profits, whilst reducing inventory and shrink.

The results of Mission's e retaripe programme in Southern California showed an increase in sales of more than 300 per cent for oniler.

Barnard said: "Avocado is traditionally difficult, as fruit picked on the same day from the same tree can have a very different level of maturity.

avocados for consumers across the US."

The SIQ-FT utilises Sinclair patented bellows with piezoelectric sensors to measure firmness around the circumference of every fruit online and can sort produce into up to six firmness bands. The system operates at commercial speeds of up to 10 fruit per second and is compatible with all major sizing and grading equipment. SIQ-FT systems are now installed at commercial fruit operations worldwide including the US, UK, Europe, Chile, New Zealand and South Africa. Product applications include avocado, apples, kiwifruit, stonefruit and mango.