



A cracker year for nut farms

By SANDRA GODWIN

PISTACHIO growers have harvested their earliest and biggest crop on record.

The last bins of the 1600-tonne crop were trucked to the Australian Pioneer Pistachio Company processing plant at Robinvale this week.

Company director Chris Joyce said the crop was about 8 per cent bigger than the 2005 record and dwarfed the company's first commercial crop of seven tonnes in 1991.

He said the value of the crop was down about 15 per cent on last year at \$11 million, but still well above the long-term average.

"Prices have been high for three years, so we've been having a bit of a picnic," Mr Joyce said.

He said strong prices had allowed growers to buy water for this year's crop, which matured early because of the dry conditions.

The "shake and catch machines" that harvest the nuts can clear up to three trees a minute.

A hydraulic shaker grips the tree trunk and vibrates it with mature nuts caught in nets and tipped on to a conveyor belt.

Trees are usually shaken twice a season, with a fully-grown tree yielding about 40kg on the first run.

A second shake a few weeks later usually produces up to 6kg.

The nuts are milled at the Robinvale plant to remove the fleshy pink outer hull.

They are then heated to encourage unsplit shells to open.

They are packed raw, or as nuts in shells, or further processed to the roasted and salted stages.

Mr Joyce said the success of the industry over the past five years had encouraged new plantings of about 50ha. Another 100ha is expected to be planted in the next year.

Australia has about 30 growers with 650ha of pistachio orchards. Most them farm along the Murray River in NSW, Victoria and South Australia and 95 per cent of the national crop is processed at Robinvale.

It takes pistachio trees up to seven years to produce nuts. They reach maturity at 12 years and have a commercial life of more than 50 years.



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Page 2 of 2



Good times:
strong prices
have seen the
pistachio nut
industry
flourish at
Robinvale in
recent years.