

Background interview with Stuart Tustin at the Focus Grove field day held on Ruth and Craig Leaf-Wright's grove – November 2015.

Lilley: When you look at the overall Focus Grove project concept, is there anything missing from the objectives?

Tustin: I think it's a matter of taking the important steps one at a time and I think the Focus Grove programme is absolutely focussed exactly on the critical factors that are going to make a difference between, almost, being in business and being out of business.

One is around getting the productivity of groves up to around the range they should be in and that's highly connected to the leaf canopy and the pressure of the diseases we have to deal with in New Zealand's maritime climate.

To go beyond those two particular points at this (initial) stage in the focus grove project I think would be a distraction because these are game-changing technologies that are needed.

You can start to do a number of other things down the track if your productivity is up and you've got more money in the business.

Lilley: It's almost a chicken and egg situation?

Tustin: It is like a chicken and egg situation. Some of the productivity in the very erratic cropping years and that sort of thing.

I have to say since I've been involved with Olives New Zealand and ... you drive around looking at canopies and you look across the fence and think 'that's just a disaster,' you know.

I've been working in Australia up in the Goulburn Valley with apples and things and you drive along and see the olive groves over there where it never rains and they've got acres and acres of water through their irrigation schemes and the trees are just so packed with leaves it's unbelievable. And of course they have no disease pressure.

So I think the concept of Focus Grove and what they're targeting is absolutely central.

Lilley: Can we make it better than a merely marginal opportunity or industry?

Tustin: Well I'm not sure what the long-run average yield per tree or per hectare has been over the long term ...

Lilley: Pretty low.¹

Tustin: Pretty low, and I think we're talking at the moment of trying to get; regularly, year-on-year, 20 kilos a tree at standard-type spacing.

But I have to say I think the Focus Grove Project really would say its ultimate target is somewhat higher. I think they're really thinking we should be able to do 30 (kilos a tree) but let's try and do it in two bites. We may overshoot the 20 (kilo level) and we've seen some evidence of the possibility of this - like the grove in Hawke's Bay that did (better than) 18 kilos average a tree of Frantoio last year and it's got flowering (this year) as heavy as we're looking at here (Leafyridge in late November), so it's clearly going to be quite a lot more.

But we just don't know and that's part of the way these things work.

You take some relatively simple but carefully thought-out steps, apply the technologies, measure what happens and then let's look at where we might go after that.

Lilley: So you think the initial three-year cycle (of the programme) will give a first read?

Tustin: Just enough time, definitely a first read. We are lucky we have a grove here in Masterton in very good condition because of the work that has gone on over the last 18 months and so this might give us a bit of insight into what the other groves might look like in five years' time. We'll be able to follow this up, all things being equal.

¹ Olives NZ note: Currently the national average is less than 10kg per tree with this being the target in 2017 for the Focus Grove Project and lifting to 15 kg per tree in 2018.

Lilley: (It seems) one of the things missing from the project – the whole driver of this industry – is the soil, the tree and its nutrition², what goes in to the whole productive base for what we get out. Has that been considered at any stage?

Tustin: It's been thought about for sure, I would think. I wasn't closely involved in the early development of the FGP, but I think Andrew (Taylor)'s remark would be no amount of nutrition is going to fix a disease problem or a productivity problem which is largely predicated on a disease.

So if we start to crop at much heavier yields there will be a greater depletion of nutrients out of the soil and we'll need to factor that in.

At the very least we should be able to calculate what we're removing in the fruit. That's a normal practice in many tree crops as a minimum top replenish what was removed by the crop. That's generally mulching and prunings returned to the soil.

These trees are grown in a diversity of conditions. I think water is possibly the thing that is under-rated rather than nutrition. I think we can get a lot of benefit out of better utilisation of water and probably a greater supply of water - if it is available.

Once we get these canopies really humming we want to begin to learn something about their water use to have some idea of what we should really be doing. And there are ways in which we can do that.

Lilley: And, after that, maybe soil and inputs?

Tustin: Yes I think so. We always have to worry about that in the long run. We don't want to be depleting the soils, for sure.

Lilley: Just that it seems there has been no stress on that, no discussion on it, and it seems to me to drive what the tree is doing?

Tustin: Yes, though in many ways looking out here and seeing an olive grove peacefully growing in this soil, when the alternative could be dairy cows, I think this is taking care of the soil a lot better than a hundred dairy cows. It is a passive and environmentally sensitive land use.

In the long run if we allow the soil delivery to decline – and by that I mean not just the nutrient supply but the most important thing, the organic matter content and the organic matter structure, the long-run sustainability index would be, at least as a bottom line, to try to conserve the current organic matter level of the soil and not deplete it beyond where it is at.

The real target would be to try to improve it but that probably is, in many ways, considered a slightly more luxurious sort of holistic objective.

It is important in the big picture and in the long range but it is not really going to be connected to profitability in the short term.

Lilley: Of the four Focus Groves you've seen, what's your overall impression? Is there an early fix for some of the issues?

Tustin: There is a simple fix but it's not easy. The problem is very simple.

The first step is taking control of the disease in the canopy. By taking control of that we retain the leaf area of the tree and everything flows from that.

That's probably the most critical because even when we restructure the trees for light, productivity and all that, if we still can't hang on to our leaves that is going to be ineffective.

So while the thought of spraying for a lot of people is complicated and not very appealing and foreign to their experience and probably not always in their game plan, I'm afraid it's a reality of being in the olive oil business. If you are seriously in it as a business whether it be large or small, that (spraying) is absolutely crucial.

I think everyone has the same objective: they would dearly love to regularly produce a really beautiful olive oil - and not cost an arm and a leg to do it.

² Olives NZ note: The previous unsuccessful Focus Grove Project applications did include other factors such as nutrition and irrigation but MPI advised that this was too ambitious and the 2016 application should have a much more narrow focus. Hence the two factors – canopy management and disease management.