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Eyeing a future where fruit pickers are trained by virtual reality

Training fruit pickers using virtual reality equipment, employing robots to move fruit containers and wearing exoskeletons to support physical labour are all possibilities being considered by Australian berry growers to boost labour efficiency.

Delivered through Hort Innovation and led by The Growth Drivers in consultation with berry growers, the research aimed to identify practical technology-based solutions to address one of the industry's biggest challenges.

The identified technologies were then developed in consultation with prospective technology providers, before being validated and improved through interactions with growers, including interviews and a dedicated grower workshop.

Hort Innovation chief executive Brett Fifield said the research provides a glimpse of the not-too-distant future.

"There is an increasing demand from horticultural industries to explore and adopt technologies that help solve growers' biggest challenges," he said.

"The berry industry has experienced significant growth in both [volume and value](#) but is heavily dependent on hand-picking to meet the demand for fresh fruit."

The Growth Drivers project lead Ky Snyder said the research demonstrated there are multiple solutions out there for berry growers, and the horticulture industry in general.

"The use of virtual reality is becoming increasingly popular in horticulture, providing workers with immersive and engaging training experiences," he said. "There is huge potential for the technology to revolutionise fruit picker training by reducing training time significantly, and also facilitating off-season and off-site training."

"Another example are the autonomous collaborative robots that use artificial intelligence to navigate between locations for various in-field tasks such as crop scanning and transportation. By eliminating time spent by pickers in transporting picked fruit and for collection of supplies, a potential labour saving of up to 20 per cent across picking crews is possible. "

Hillwood Berries farm manager Andrea O'Halloran said the research has expanded the berry industry's understanding of what is possible.

"Who knew that autonomous robots and virtual reality headsets could be just around the corner for berry growers?" she said. "This research provides our industry with a roadmap for further development of these solutions, with the ultimate goal of berry growers being able to put this technology into action."

For more information on the project and its findings, visit the [Rubus Labour Optimisation website here](#).

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