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Rapid response tool to protect Aussie farms

More than 60,000 hectares of the nation's orchards stand to benefit from increased biosecurity and disaster response times after the release of the Australian Tree Crop Rapid Response Map today.

The map shows commercial avocado, mango and macadamia crops around the country, and has been formulated using satellite imagery analysed by scientists; land-use information from industry and government, as well as 'citizen science' data collected via a purpose-built app.

Hort Innovation chief executive John Lloyd said more than 12 months gathering data had paid off for avocado, mango and macadamia growers who had called for increased technology on-farm to protect crops and boost efficiency.

"By conveying where avocado, macadamia and mango crops are across the country, the Australian Tree Crops Rapid Response Map will help industry bodies and government agencies instantly plan quarantine areas following any disease incursions," he said.

"And when overlaid with weather maps, as we saw earlier this year with Cyclone Debbie in Queensland, responders, and even insurance companies, can quickly and easily identify which farms have been impacted by severe weather events."

Mr Lloyd said this work also has the potential to be extended to other crop types into the future, supporting growers through faster damage assessments, aid decisions and disease control plans.

The technology also provides a glimpse into a future where growers could potentially quickly identify areas of their crops that are less healthy than others, indicating pollination, nutrient or soil health issues for example.

The Australian Tree Crops Rapid Response Map is supplied by the Queensland Department of Science, Information Technology and Innovation, working with the University of Queensland.

The Map is one tool from a broader \$6.8M project that is supported by Hort Innovation, through funding from the Australian Government Department of Agriculture and Water Resources as part of its Rural R&D for Profit programme, and led by the University of New England (UNE).

Various studies are taking place around the country as part of the larger project - from the University of Sydney using robots to identify certain types of produce to the UNE employing technology, including drones, to help identify disease through heat sensing.

Researchers have also been combining satellite images and data from hand-held fruit scanning guns to help growers make decisions on farm, such as where to send pickers first to optimise the quality of the produce they are sending to market.

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