Testimony: Dan Peach, Oakberry Farms Ltd

As a blueberry orchardist of 27 years I have seen many changes in the way we need to conduct our business to survive and ultimately prosper.

One thing that has remained constant has been my belief that to be successful, maximising production as efficiently as possible is critical.

Our means of achieving this in the berry industry is to use crop protection methods. For some of these methods, like bird netting structures, if you don't have them, you don't survive as grower.

With the majority of berry orchards being relatively small scale, using the whole land area is critical. Generally, row spacing of 3m in width and a headland of 5m are necessary to allow movement of machinery and people for harvesting, pruning and spraying. Additionally, plants can grow up to 1.8m in width at full maturity. Therefore, the proposed setbacks would require a significant portion of berries to be removed, or not planted where developing a new site. In my experience, net and wind break can barely be seen from neighbouring properties.

In the last 5 years, it has become obvious that we need to do more protection structures than we have ever done before, this has led us to extending our traditional harvest season, not only to be financial, but to extend the work available for staff, a critical component of any business. Our casual staff are now skilled workers and providing them with full time employment is the ultimate goal, not only for them, but for us and I guess for the country as a whole.

We employ 50-60 staff for an extended season, for around 20 of those, that is now 9 months long. One of our key ways of achieving this is through the use of tunnels for crop protection, from wind, rain, frost and hail.

I would say that most berry farms are small in size, 2-5 ha, and this very labour intensive, for these farms to be financial, the whole land area needs to be used, there are many small blocks through the Waikato, with a lot of historical subdivision of high value soils.