

# Pruning rush to beat storms

By Peter Lamb

THE Australian Dried Fruits Association is urging grower members to be alert to more rain forecast and plan an early start to harvest.

ADEA industry development officer John Hawtin said yesterday growers should do this "due to the prospect of thunderstorms being experienced during the coming week".

"In some cases, maturity of sultanas is earlier than usual, especially with lighter crops and where berry size is smaller," he said.

"Growers should act quickly and assess their properties, identify their ripest patches of fruit, and commence summer pruning in anticipation of rain (summer pruning is cutting the fruiting canes to allow bunches to dry on the vine for later mechanical harvesting).

"This will assist in maximising production from an already diminishing crop, and making fruit safe from further rain damage.

"Traditionally, the dried vine fruit harvest starts about the second week of February, but there's no sense waiting to that date if fruit's already mature enough and a start can be made to summer pruning."

The Bureau of Meteorology has indicated today will be fine apart from the chance of a late shower, with the chance of a thunderstorm tomorrow.

Elders Weather is also tipping late showers today, possible thunderstorms tomorrow, a fine Wednesday, thunderstorms clearing on Thursday and possible thunderstorms on Friday.

Mr Hawtin said growers should monitor their



EARLY START: Eddie Lloyd is using electronic secateurs to cut canes in a race to summer prune before there's another rain.

fruit maturity levels and consider the option of earlier summer pruning, or harvest, on their ripest patches.

Already, there had been reports of variable amounts of damage in the sultana crop. "This damage will be further exacerbated with any additional rain, as well as affecting other undamaged fruit," Mr Hawtin said.

"By summer pruning, further splitting and mould development will be reduced or stopped.

"Growers should also note that with damaged fruit, experience suggests that summer pruning and then delay-

ing spraying fruit with drying emulsion for two to four days will reduce berry drop.

Mr Hawtin said the season was earlier than average, and growers who had not tested their fruit might be quite surprised at the maturity levels.

"There's usually a part of a block where an early start can be made.

"Our concern is that we could be in for some more hot and wet conditions. Some growers are already cutting."

The Lloyd family on Renetook and Cowra avenues have started their first patch of vines being

"cut" is showing the effects of sunburn and some rain damage.

They'll keep going now "rain hail or shine" until all their crop's secured.

Warren Lloyd, ADEA Mildura Branch president and a 5th generation of the family (which has owned some of the properties since 1896), said they were concerned more wet weather might be developing.

Eddie Lloyd, a 4th generation grower said by last night, they'd be close to having eight hectares cut.

"This is our ripest patch," he said. "The grapes were test-

ing at 21 to 22 Brix when we started last Thursday.

"We'd originally planned a start early this week."

In all, they'd be harvesting from about half the family's 40 hectares.

An eight hectare patch of vines has been kept alive but will not be harvested, they lost their carina curranis in the heat wave in November, another 3.2 hectares were chopped off last year, and another 1.6 hectares will be chopped off once the fruit's been harvested.

A patch they weren't going to pick wasn't watered until October, and surprisingly, some

grapes will now be harvested.

"We'll only cover costs," Eddie said.

Each man can cut canes at the rate of about 0.8 hectares a day. They've decided not to cut mechanically, as in a normal year, because too many berries would shatter from bunches.

"We were planning to machine prune, but the bunches are too fragile," Owen Lloyd said.

He said the sunburnt berries could be separated when mechanical harvesting, because the shrivelled fruit had little substance and would be removed by the adjustable blowers.

The Loyds will employ another helper, and between them, the four should be able to cut 3.2 hectares a day.

Progress will be limited by fruit maturity because, while the sultanas are ripe enough, the muscats have a little way to go.

In case of rain, they've sprayed the balance of their blocks to hold moulds.

Eddie said they could have their whole crop secured within a fortnight.

Growers seeking more advice should contact John Hawtin at ADEA on 5023 5174.