

Innovation leader Sonia Whiteman focuses on protecting supply



Dr Sonia Whiteman has returned to Zespri as team leader for the Innovation department's 'protect supply' platform, six years after her last stint with the company.

She has a plant pathology background, with a PhD specialising in a grape fungal disease of a similar nature to Psa.

Her previous role with Zespri saw her working in the orchard productivity team, supporting the rollout of Gold3, Gold9 and Green14. Sonia was later seconded to KVH during the Psa incursion because of her technical background.

What attracted you to the new role?

Coming into a research management role for an industry that I feel a close connection to and a topic that uses my technical training felt like a perfect fit.

When the opportunity came up, I looked back over the past six months and realised where I was getting my energy and drive from was my role as an associate director on the Kiwifruit Vine Health board and member of the Psa steering group, because I was really enjoying the highly-technical environment.

While it was tough to leave my team and growers at Apata GROW, I felt my ability to make a positive contribution to the kiwifruit industry would be much greater within the Zespri Innovation team.

What will the protect supply platform cover?

The platform covers the portfolios of biosecurity, Psa, market access, crop protection and food security. From a technical perspective, it is a really tight portfolio but with a diverse range of stakeholders to engage with.

What are some of the challenges you are addressing for growers?

We are faced with an increasingly complex landscape and our ability to respond to pests and diseases, both through increasing regulatory pressure and market standards that reduce the number of options available to us.

The potential for biosecurity incursions, the impact of climate change on existing pests and disease, and the introduction of new cultivars likely to have different susceptibilities to our existing cultivars, all add up to an environment that's more challenging for growers.

We have an opportunity to work with our national and international researchers to respond to these challenges with excellent science, with the ultimate goal of putting tools and technologies in the hands of growers.

What are your goals for the role?

I hope to act as an advocate for what science can do, to underpin the growth of one of New Zealand's top primary industries and provide value to our key stakeholders.

The key to achieving these goals is maintaining a close relationship with our growers so I can understand what they are facing on a day-to-day basis. I can't wait to spend more time with growers and researchers, talking pathogens.