

NZGROWER[®]



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HORTICULTURE NEW ZEALAND

TURBULENT TOMATO TIMES



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Cover image; Trefor Ward.



TIME TO GET NEW ZEALAND MOVING AGAIN!



Barry O'Neil : HortNZ president

As growers were struggling with drought conditions last month, I highlighted in my column the need for New Zealand to get serious about building water storage systems to enable greater resilience in horticulture. And wow, if only we had water storage schemes available most would now be full with the amount of rain that has fallen out of the sky over the last month!

About 90 percent of global water is used to produce food, fibre and beverages; and with the growing world population comes the need to also grow water security. Currently, 98 percent of New Zealand's freshwater goes into the sea or evaporates. It does not make sense that we cannot capture it during high rainfall events. Even more ridiculous is that current consenting requirements make it nigh on impossible to get approval to do so.

Unfortunately the heavy rain and Cyclone Dovi have also created some major growing and harvesting challenges and with unbelievable humidity in many parts of the country, growers are also facing problems with fungal blight.

Building greater resilience in our production systems to manage impacts of a changing climate is unfortunately a priority need, whether that be the need for water storage,

moving to covered cropping, or breeding superior plant varieties that are able to handle more extreme weather realities.

Also I wrote in my article last month that Omicron had just been identified in New Zealand. The virus is now well and truly present among New Zealand communities and with that come the realities of living and working with Omicron and ensuring the survival of our businesses. The apple and kiwifruit sectors have started their massive harvest efforts - still short of thousands of workers and facing uncertainty whether there will be enough staff to pick and pack. Businesses also have concerns as to whether they will be able to continue to operate should staff become unwell and have to go into isolation - taking the few staff they do have out of the workplace at the critical harvest time.

I think we have been sold a pup - or perhaps I should say we have been asked to swallow a RAT! Achieving 90 percent-plus vaccination levels was never just for self-preservation in my view, rather we had the expectation it would allow our country and businesses to re-open, sooner rather than later. Just as is happening around the globe, from Denmark which has removed every single Covid-19 restriction, to Australia that is opening its borders to everyone **now** - not in six months' time.

While horticulture is grateful to have access to Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme workers, we still need thousands more workers and the only way we will get these is for them to be able to enter the country.

There simply aren't enough people in New Zealand willing to fill these seasonal roles. Under phase two of the traffic light system, the isolation time for a positive case has reduced to ten days, and for close contacts, seven days, in an attempt to keep the supply chain operating. Although this is a positive shift for industry, roadblocks such as securing a sufficient supply of RAT tests still exist and will continue to pose challenges for our growers and their operations. In my opinion, we are unnecessarily handicapping our businesses and have halted any future growth opportunities in horticulture as everyone is being forced to bunker down in survival mode.

“

About 90 percent of global water is used to produce food, fibre and beverages; and with the growing world population comes the need to also grow water security

What are we really achieving by not opening our borders fully now, instead of phasing to fully open in October, other than seriously damaging our economy? We don't need to build or require anything new to happen, we have the tools, and the settings that will be used are all agreed, so what is the problem with opening now so we can start to get more international workers into our industry?

We all feel for the small business owners and workers who have been forced to close. Others have taken large financial hits due to lockdowns and the absence of tourists. And let's not forget the \$70 billion spent on responding to Covid-19 that has to be paid back, most likely by our grandchildren - what an inheritance!

While these figures are alarming, the other very real impact is on people's wellbeing.

“
Currently, 98 percent of New Zealand's freshwater goes into the sea or evaporates

We don't have to look far to see the effects from this situation in our communities and our workers. People are worried sick about their future roles and incomes, dealing with the huge pressure of trying to find staff for their business to be able to survive, while also being exasperated whether shipping logistics will allow their products to get to market. And while I don't agree with some of the weird antivaxxer claims, I don't like that we have such outraged debate and division in our community, which we are all feeling. I do feel for the people who have lost their jobs due to their passionate beliefs.

After the initial vaccination roll-out debacle, I think most of us were happy enough to be restricted when we finally got serious about reaching the 90 percent plus vaccination target. In doing so, we have given those that are most vulnerable to the virus valuable time to get the protection they needed. It also gave the health system time to prepare for handling cases of Covid.

But we haven't given our businesses, including most in horticulture, the certainty they need to successfully operate.

It seems our policy makers and government are being spooked by poor advice, such as modelling which predicted 50,000 cases by Waitangi weekend! They have become too risk adverse as a result, when they should be learning what others internationally are doing or have done. Don't get me wrong, I think much of the response has been handled well, but what is being done now to the hand that feeds all of us - our economy - is wrong.

So to those policy makers in the Beehive - it is time to take stock of what's at stake. Our businesses are already struggling enough with finding staff, huge, inflationary-driven cost increases, including labour costs, and the copious amount of red tape and compliance costs - let alone Covid restrictions. As a country with high levels of vaccination and a nation that had more time to prepare for Omicron than any other country in the world, why do we have to suffer the indignity of not being able to operate due to poor policy decisions unnecessarily keeping workers out of New Zealand, and not at times allowing healthy staff to come to work?

“
let's not forget the \$70 billion spent on responding to Covid-19 that has to be paid back, most likely by our grandchildren

Let's not become the laughing stock of the world by thinking we are achieving something better for our people and our country by these policies, when every other country has experienced to their detriment that they are pointless.

It's time to get New Zealand moving again!

Kia kaha. ●

NZGROWER

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THE BURDEN OF LEGACY



Nadine Tunley : HortNZ chief executive

To say it has been a gruelling return to work post-Christmas would be an understatement. We knew we would be racing the clock with the arrival of Omicron and the peak in our horticulture season.

Our industry has done an amazing job since March 2020 when Covid-19 put New Zealand into its first lockdown. All of you have stepped up and responded to all the protocols and requirements necessary to keep fresh produce getting to consumers, domestically and across the world.

In the 30-plus years that I have been directly involved in New Zealand agriculture, one of the constants I have observed, admired and been drawn too, is growers' and farmers' passion for and deep connectivity to their roles. What you do is not just your job, but the very essence of your being. I remember in 2012 making the mistake of telling one of the apple industry patriarchs that "you don't always put a value on your lifestyle choice."

“

What you do is not just your job, but the very essence of your being

For the record, that statement landed like a cup of cold sick and I think it took every ounce of restraint for him not to literally throw me out of his office. At the time, I was referring to the essence I touched on above. That you don't grow and farm just as a job. For many, it is intergenerational: a practice, skill and legacy passed down and with that, a sense of responsibility, which without even realising it, adds a dynamic that other jobs do not carry.

In 2012, the apple industry was in a bad shape and Stephen Joyce, a National government Minister at the time, publicly stated we were a sunset industry! So, what a difference a decade makes.

But ten years on, we are again in a very difficult place. Added to that, the world has completely changed. We live in an over-stimulated environment where information is literally at our fingertips, and it is often uncensored because the whole world has a voice through social media.

Over-communication

The problem with communication now is that by the time we get it to you, it is out of date. Information around Omicron has changed daily and sometimes hourly, which unfortunately has led to considerable confusion. I am hopeful that by the time you read this article, we will be well into Phase 3 of the Omicron response and the government is being more pragmatic.

“

The problem with communication now is that by the time we get it to you, it is out of date

Without a doubt, we can criticise and tear holes in the flat-footed approach from the government to importing sufficient rapid antigen tests. This shortage has been a major issue and as I write, still is. However, I can also say that it often seems simple when looking at a problem from one or two perspectives.

Making decisions is never easy, yet all of us do it 100 times a day. We often do not notice our decision making due to the low consequence level of many of those decisions. But imagine just for a second, making a decision that affects five million people.

I can tell you, that making a decision for even 5,000 people – in this case, growers – is near on impossible, especially when there are polar-opposite views on the topic. Here at Horticulture New Zealand, we have that situation now in the environmental area. We will never make a decision that will keep everyone happy, and the government has been forced to do the same lately.

Chief concern

My chief concern for the next few months is that with all the challenges you as growers are facing, clarity of thought becomes difficult and even impossible on occasion.

“

The product groups and HortNZ are working together as much as possible to deflect some of the government's pressure for you. We are all here to support you as best we can, so do call us when enough is enough

I am acutely aware that you are completely over what feels like more bureaucracy around the environment and emissions, labour and wage increases, and freshwater, when you are literally trying to survive, get through the season and have a business to salvage at the end of it. Understanding business and industry are areas in which this government is lacking considerable experience and judgement.

The product groups and HortNZ are working together as much as possible to deflect some of the government's pressure for you. We are all here to support you as best we can, so do call us when enough is enough. If you are feeling frustrated and at the end of your tether, I would prefer you call any of us and download, than carry it all yourselves.

If you need help or support, please do reach out as we have options that will assist. The responsibility that many of you are shouldering is beyond normal parameters and making simple, rational and non-emotional decisions can be too much.

We have had a lot go against us so far this season, and there are more challenges on the horizon, so don't let asking for help be one of them. ●

'A problem shared is a problem solved'. Also consider reaching out to:

Farmstrong: <https://farmstrong.co.nz/wellbeing-topics/getting-help/>

Need to talk? <https://1737.org.nz/>

Rural Support Trusts: <https://www.rural-support.org.nz/>

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YOUR LEVY AT WORK

INDUSTRY WIDE ISSUES FOR INDUSTRY GOOD

NATURAL RESOURCES AND ENVIRONMENT

Michelle Sands : HortNZ environment manager

Resource Management Reform

The government has provided more details and timeframes for the Resource Management Act Reform.

The Resource Management Act will be replaced by three new Acts:

- Natural Built Environment
- Strategic Planning
- Climate Change Response.

Horticulture New Zealand submitted on the exposure draft of the Natural and Built Environment Bill in 2021. In the third quarter of 2022, the government intends to introduce the full Natural and Built Environment Bill as well as the Strategic Planning Bill to Parliament. Both Acts are expected to be passed into law in 2023.

Consultation on the Climate Change Response Act will begin in 2022.

The Natural and Built Environment Act and the Strategic Planning Act include the following key elements:

- A national planning framework that sets national environmental limits and targets.
- Regional spatial strategies that identify the big issues and opportunities facing each region. These strategies will be used to plan infrastructure to direct development.
- Natural and Built Plans, which will be single regional plans that will replace regional and district plans. They will cover use, allocation and land use management.
- A consenting framework that is proposed to be more directive and reduce council discretion.
- A compliance monitoring and enforcement framework, which will look to strengthen cost recovery, financial penalties and other sanctions.

HortNZ has provided feedback through targeted engagement. The key issue raised by HortNZ is ensuring the national planning framework adequately provides for the rural environment and rural communities. We seek a framework that recognises the values associated with horticulture, including economic contribution, food security and low emission food production. We want these values to be considered when natural resource allocation policies are set.

We also seek that provisions that support housing and municipal water supplies are planned for in a manner that also supports the use of highly productive land for food production.

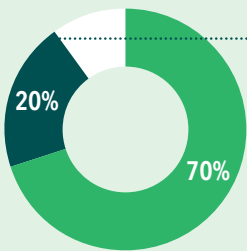


The key issue raised by HortNZ is ensuring the national planning framework adequately provides for the rural environment and rural communities

National Environmental Standard for Drinking Water

The government is proposing a new National Environmental Standard for Drinking Water. HortNZ has consulted with product groups and district associations to gain feedback on the proposal.

The National Environmental Standard for Drinking Water will build on the new definition of a drinking water supply, which was introduced in the Water Services Act in 2021. The new definition captures many more water supplies.



20 percent of growers know how much greenhouse gas emissions their farm generates

Nearly 70 percent have an approved Good Agriculture Practice (GAP) plan that provides a framework to manage their greenhouse emissions sources

It includes many growers' bores where water is used for drinking and supplies more than one dwelling. For example, a supply that provides water to a grower's home as well as workers' accommodation.

A large area of productive land will be captured by drinking water source protection areas. HortNZ seeks an approach aligned with the National Policy Statement for Freshwater, where values and limits are set at a catchment level, to account for a range of values. This is so that the safety of drinking water is planned for at a strategic level, rather than by imposing conditions on activities through source water protection zones at the consent level.

He Waka Eke Noa - Primary Sector Climate Action Partnership

He Waka Eke Noa is a partnership between government, the primary sector and iwi/Māori to build a framework for pricing and reporting agricultural emissions. The aim of the partnership is to build a framework that will encourage emissions reductions, support integrated sequestration, and improve the ability of farmers and growers to adapt to a changing climate.

There are milestones within the Climate Change Response Act that will measure the influence the partnership is having on how many farmers and growers understand their emissions and their options to reduce emissions.

To date approximately 20 percent of growers know how much greenhouse gas emissions their farm generates and nearly 70 percent have an approved Good Agriculture Practice (GAP) plan that provides a framework to manage their greenhouse emissions sources.



HortNZ seeks an approach aligned with the National Policy Statement for Freshwater, where values and limits are set at a catchment level, to account for a range of values

HortNZ has asked growers for their thoughts on the pricing options that have been developed by the He Waka Eke Noa Partnership. There are two options, as well as the Emissions Trading Scheme backstop:

- Farm Level, where pricing, rebates and reporting all occur at the farm or farm collective level.
- Processor Level Hybrid, where the emissions price would be included in the price of milk, meat and fertiliser, and rebates and reporting are via a voluntary contract at the farm or farm collective level.

Grower feedback has emphasised the importance of a system that is clear, simple and has efficient administrative costs so that revenue generated by the horticulture sector can be recycled to benefit low emissions horticultural farming. ●

The He Waka Eke Noa Partnership is open to feedback until 27 March. Go here to have your say: <https://hewakaekenoa.nz/your-say/>

Growers can also find out more by visiting the HortNZ website:

<https://www.hortnz.co.nz/environment/he-waka-eke-noa/>

YOUR INDUSTRY



ACROSS THE SECTOR - ACROSS THE COUNTRY

YOUNG GROWERS FEATURE

Pages 9-25





CENTRAL OTAGO GROWERS SHARE HOW COMPETITION SUCCESS HAS SHAPED THEIR PATHS



Jordan Carroll, a cherry orchard manager at CentralPac, has entered the Young Grower competition on multiple occasions and says it was a great opportunity to meet other likeminded young growers

Orcharding is by nature an isolating job, but involvement in the Young Grower of the Year competition has expanded the horizons for many young people looking to carve out a future in the horticulture industry. BONNIE FLAWS speaks to Central Otago competitors, old and new, about their experiences and where they are today.

Fourth generation Central Otago fruit grower, Simon Webb, says growers from the region are very hands-on and still probably a bit “old school”.

His business, Webb’s Fruit, has been in the family since 1914 and has 50-hectares planted out in peaches, nectarines, plums and apples, including some original trees planted by his forefathers.

Family-owned businesses continue to dominate Central Otago when compared to other fruit growing regions, and this is part of what makes its produce special, Simon says.

In Hawke’s Bay, contract gangs are brought in far more for harvest and pruning, for example, but at Webb’s Fruit, Simon and his team are doing all the work.

“I spent all morning in the packing shed and then I’ve got a couple of shops to take care of,” he says. “The younger people come through and it’s hard to teach them if you are not beside them doing it yourself.”

Perhaps this is the secret sauce that gives Central Otago its reputation for consistently having high quality competitors participating in the regional and final Young Grower of Year competitions.

“The soils here are all over the place and you have really got to know the area yourself. The soil can change within 100 metres and you have to know your locations and do your research before you plant a piece of dirt out, or you’ll get yourself in trouble real quick,” he adds.

Simon Webb was the winner of the first Central Otago regional competition back in 2006 when it was called the ‘Young Horticulturalist of the Year’. Being involved got him out of his comfort zone, he says.

“It made me think about how we might do things differently because that was the kind of questions they asked.”

Back then the competition was more theory than practical but it led to Simon making many connections in the wider



Hamish Darling won the Central Otago Young Grower of the Year competition in 2018 and went on to place third in the national finals. He now works for Sumfood in Cromwell

sector that he could tap into on his journey to keep the family business thriving.

Webb's Fruit is still a successful operation after it went through family succession, with two fruit shops selling produce directly to customers and a mail order business. It supplies fruit directly to some local supermarkets too, and distributes fruit nationally through MG Marketing. There are also apples grown for export - mostly Jazz™, Gala and the Pacific series, he says.

"I enjoy growing peaches and nectarines the most because we make the most money out of them. You need to get a balance of volume and quality, you can't miss out on either or you're in trouble."

Kris Robb

Kris Robb, general manager at Clyde Orchards, was the winner of the Central Otago Young Grower of the Year competition back in 2007 - the year after Simon Webb. He was working at Sunbury Park Orchard at the time.

"It was 15 years ago, the last year I could enter it," Kris says. "I had been in horticulture ever since school. I came up to Central Otago for an eight-week summer job and never left really."

Winning the regional competition came with an ego boost for having achieved something and acquiring a certain level of industry recognition.

"Coming from Central and summerfruit, it's easy to feel like a big fish in a small pond," he says. "Going up to the national competition and being nurtured by those industry leaders certainly opened up the fact that the horticulture sector is huge and summerfruit growers are only a very small part of it."

Kris recalls how well the programme had been put together. Getting to have breakfast with the industry heads and touring other operations were highlights, he says.

"It was a good way to get networking. At that time I was getting into a company partnership and the competition gave me enough notoriety for my partner to have some confidence in me and that my boss wasn't just talking me up."

And he is still doing exciting stuff. Now working for Clyde Orchards, Kris is growing Flatto™ peaches exclusively and manages six hectares of cherries as an early crop, in large houses with retractable roofing. This means the business can control the temperature and humidity and protect the trees from wind and rain.

When the weather is good, they open the roofing right up, and it closes automatically when it starts raining.

"We're finding that the returns are far greater and are from more than just being early," Kris explains. "Our cropping is more consistent because we can manipulate the environment through pollination time. And they don't get a drop of rain on them, so every fruit that we grow goes into a box."

Another bonus is that the early season means they can secure their workforce earlier and then hold on to them.

More recent winners are well on their way to established careers too.

Last year's regional winner, Jordan Carroll, is a cherry orchard manager at CentralPac, which owns ten hectares of orchards and manages 35ha more.

“

Our cropping is more consistent because we can manipulate the environment through pollination time

The 26-year-old decided after completing a degree in industrial design, that sitting behind a desk all day was not for him, which resulted in a bit of a crisis about what he was going to do with his life.

After finishing university, Jordan took on a summer job on an orchard, during which his boss suggested he stay on and give orcharding a try.

"I really loved it," Jordan says. "I started my apprenticeship two years ago, a certificate in horticulture."

I think I just really like the challenge. The company I work for now, which is the same company I worked for during the competition, is an orchard management business and we have just started doing cherries."

He started his career out on the tractors and later fell into a role running the irrigation for two summers. Later he moved into supervision and managing blocks on the off-season.

“

Last year's big rain event in January wiped out 40 percent of the crop, and this year the biggest challenge has been getting air freight space for exports

"I've been in the sector full-time for five years now. I entered the competition in 2018 also, but didn't place ... it was a reality check that I was still quite new to the industry and had a lot to learn, so I worked a cherry season in Canada. The scale is so much bigger and the company that I worked for produced the same amount of cherries as the whole of New Zealand does."

Winning the regional competition in 2021 was a great experience, he says, giving him a chance to meet other young growers.

"We had this event where there were 50 to 60 people under 30 years of age in horticulture. That was amazing. Down in Otago it's definitely an older demographic."

The connections he made are still going strong. He particularly likes talking to other young growers about other crops like kiwifruit and avocados.



Jordan Carroll



2022 Horticulture New Zealand Director Elections

Calling for Nominations for Two Directors

The Horticulture New Zealand constitution provides for a term of three years for elected directors with one third of directors retiring by rotation each year.

The following Directors retire by rotation this year.

Barry O'Neil is offering himself for re-election.

Kathryn de Bruin is offering herself for re-election.

In accordance with Clause 12 (e) of the Horticulture New Zealand Constitution nominations are now being sought from individual grower members, affiliated Product Groups and affiliated Grower Associations.

Candidates must be nominated by at least two grower members or affiliated organisations.

The election is based on electing the best people for the job with no allocated seats for product, sector or regional representatives.

Candidate criteria

Nominated candidates must be:

- a person who is an active grower member of HortNZ; or
- a director, shareholder, partner or trustee of an active grower member who is appointed by that member as the principal representative of the entity in their dealings with HortNZ; or
- an employee of an active grower member who is appointed by that member as the principal representative of the entity in their dealings with HortNZ.

If more than two (2) candidates are nominated, an election will be held where individual grower members will vote for their preferred candidates. A profile for each candidate will be included with the voting papers distributed to growers.

The nomination form and position description is available on HortNZ's website www.hortnz.co.nz or can be requested from the Board Secretary via email Kerry.Norman@hortnz.co.nz or by phone 0508 467 869.

**Nominations close at 5.00pm
on Friday 8 April 2022**



Outdoor work often appeals to young people

While he is keen to continue with cherries to learn the “nitty gritty” of the crop, he doesn’t want to put all his eggs in one basket.

“At some point I would like to try something else,” he says. “Down here we have quite a lot of apricots which are seeing a resurgence with some new varieties coming out. If I did want to move to another sector, the competition has given me a really good in-road to be able to stay in horticulture.”

Cherry growing has had its ups and downs. Last year’s big rain event in January wiped out 40 percent of the crop, and this year the biggest challenge has been getting air freight space for exports, he says.

Finding labour and seasonal staff has been difficult too.



Jonathan Bates in action

For now, Jordan is enjoying cherries and capitalising on the fact he can ski during his down time in the winter months.

“I quite like the seasonality of horticulture, being able to ride the waves of a season, I enjoy that. So I see myself here for a long time. I’ve just bought a house.”

Another Otago native, Jonathan Bates, turned out to be a regional winner last year, but on this occasion representing the Nelson region. He has competed twice before in Otago, coming second in 2016, and second equal again in 2017.

“Last time [competing] in Otago was a good way to reach apple growers and assess where you sit in your age group,” Jonathan says.

He has been in the Tasman region for two years now, working as block manager for Birdhurst where he grows apples.

“As a block supervisor I’m looking after staff, I run a crew during picking and thinning and pruning. We have a minimum of 16 blocks. I worked my way up and started [my career] as a junior doing pruning and learning the ropes.”

The big benefit of being involved in the Young Grower competition was the social connection, he says. Horticulture is an industry in which it’s easy to get stuck in your own little bubble.

“It’s easy to sit on your farm and not talk to you neighbour, but he might be doing something completely different on the exact same variety and have amazing results,” Jonathan says. “But unless you are having that conversation, you are never going to realise. So for me, it was definitely building connections and creating an awareness that I am keen and interested in the industry.”

After moving to Motueka for a change of scene, Jonathan realised the competition would be a great way to introduce himself to other local growers.

"It was a bit of a shock to win," he says. "I wanted to place but didn't expect to be going to the national Young Grower finals."

His win in the Nelson regional competition last year resulted in a couple of career opportunities, he says.

The experience of being recognised for his achievements in the industry had a big impact on his self-confidence and made him realise what he was doing was "really valuable".

"We are a progressive industry that is leading the world. New Zealand apples have been voted the best in the world for the last four to five years."

The challenge of competing in the regionals was overtaken by his experience at the nationals, which he says was "a huge step up" and had a lot more to do with health and safety and compliance, making it technically harder.

He ended up coming first in tractor driving, but says that wasn't a surprise given he had been driving them since he was five.

"I have absolutely enjoyed the move to Nelson and the national competition really just opened a lot of doors to people in the industry. It was amazing the conversations we could have just between the events. I've got contacts all over the country now that I talk to about horticulture once or twice a month."

He says he'll always be an "apple man" though. He grows Envy™, Jazz™, Brookfields™ and Cox's Orange, among others.



Simon Webb's family business, Webb's Fruit

Encouraging the next generation

Simon Webb's early interest in the industry as a whole led him to capitalise on the networking opportunities the competition had brought when he competed and he is now a big believer in encouraging more young people to get involved.

"When I came into it, I focussed on industry, but others want to drive a tractor or supervise," he says. "If you listen hard enough and keep listening you can push them in that direction. Encourage them to do these events and not be afraid to lose some good staff members if they are stepping up into a more senior role somewhere else."

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Kris Robb

"If it's more suited for them to be moving on, then you encourage them to do that and you talk to your orcharding mates to find good roles."

He took on three new young workers last year and one has indicated he wants to work his way up to management, while others are interested in supervisory roles.

Simon says it's important to be sympathetic to that and know their needs and wants.

"They want to be part of your business and have a role in it... part of that is encouraging them to extend themselves and do the Young Grower [competitions]."

"I had a young girl do it last year, Megan Asher. She got second down here. She completely surprised herself and was ecstatic with how well she performed."

The biggest thing for her was the exposure to a whole lot of other young people in the same situation. They now regularly communicate through group chats to help each other solve problems on the orchard, Simon says.

Kris Robb feels the same way, saying that the competition is getting better and better.

"It's great for the guys to take themselves out of their comfort zone, challenge themselves and meet a whole heap of new people. The prizes and the kudos are substantial. There are financial prizes and internships and leadership courses, overseas travel - a lot of really cool stuff."

Kris has four staff currently completing industry training that he thinks have the potential to do well in the competition. To encourage them, he took them on a field trip to watch last year so they could get a feel for what it was like.

"I'll be pushing them to enter this year," he says. ●

COMPETITORS ADD VALUE TO THE WIDER FOOD SECTOR

Even though his job title of operations manager gives a different impression to what one might typically associate with horticulture, Hamish Darling has been involved in horticulture his whole life through his parents' orchards, and he has plans to buy land and continue the family tradition.

Hamish won the regional competition in 2018 and went on to place third in the national finals. He now works for Sumfood in Cromwell - his parents' business - as operations manager. Before taking up his current role two years ago, he worked for six years managing his uncle's orchards.

He says winning the regional competition allowed him to see the breadth of the horticultural sector in New Zealand and realise just how small his family operations were.

"One of the more memorable experiences was going to the T&G glasshouses in Pukekohe to see the industrial level production," Hamish says. "I hadn't seen that before. My father and uncle produce a lot of really good fruit, very impressively, but it's small."

His work now involves food safety monitoring using algorithms. By gathering data about food that is causing illness, or is of poor quality, they can work out what is behind it.

"We developed an algorithm that collects data across a number of sites and social media looking for any analogous food issues, geographical patterns or supply chain patterns," he says. "From that you can work out patterns of food illness occurring."

Sumfood services businesses with complex supply chains like fast food restaurants, and provides early warning about food if there is a problem, alerting clients within hours, rather than days, so the offending product can be removed from the shelves faster and at less cost.

Hamish's experience in orchards and packhouses and his trip to Pukekohe gave him insights he has found useful in his current role, he says.

"Food safety is in every food supply chain and this is just an extension of that. [In Pukekohe] you could see how as things get bigger and more complex how much wider the effects are. "If my parents have a box of fruit leave our shop with bruises or some bird poo on it, it's really easy to work out what day it was picked, where it was from and replace it. It's a lot more tricky for bigger operations sending stuff to supermarkets all over the country."

YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE A WINNER TO SUCCEED

Not every competitor walks away with a winning title, but that doesn't mean they can't build on the experience.

Christie Kirk, an orchard foreman at Hortinvest, didn't place in last year's Otago regional competition, but she was still very new to orcharding at the time.

The 24-year-old from Tarras comes from a horticultural family - growers from Gisborne, who later moved to Central Otago to grow cherries. Her parents, Sharon and Ross, then started up Hortinvest, managing orchards for investors.

Working there certainly gave her a foot in the door, but Christie's experience had been mostly in post-harvest operations doing quality control in the packhouse.

"It wasn't until the end of 2019 I got into an orchard," Christie says. "I was chucked in the deep end a bit."

She says she joined the competition to meet other young people involved in horticulture.

"Around central Otago it's more young farmers and so I wanted to meet other young growers and just be a part of it. It was really good, definitely improved my confidence, especially the speech part.

"The competition is a really good opportunity to bring all these young people together and give them a voice in the industry."

Since the competition, Christie says she has stepped up at work.

"I'm an orchard foreman but I'm achieving and doing a lot more and I have a lot more knowledge. Doing the Young Grower really opened my eyes to where I could potentially go, all of the things that I need to learn so I could be where I wanted to be."

She has her sights set on management, already overseeing a team of two, and says they are close-knit and working hard towards their vision for the orchard.

"Basically I hassle my boss a lot less."

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YOUNG GROWERS FEATURE

CONTINUING THE LEGACY OF WINNING WOMEN



Avocado grower services representative at Apata Group, Melissa Bennett, chats with grower Jill Austin on a Hydralada

Working with the inherent variabilities of the natural environment to produce high quality, fresh food for the world is among the reasons the horticultural industry is the career of choice for Melissa Bennett. ELAINE FISHER speaks to the 26-year-old about life after winning the 2021 Young Grower of the Year competition and her future endeavours.

"There are so many moving parts in horticulture, including the impacts of weather which plays such a big role in the success of what we grow," says Melissa, an avocado grower services representative at Apata Group Limited, based in the Bay of Plenty.

Known as Melissa van den Heuvel when she won the national young grower title, Melissa married her fiancé, Oscar Bennett, in February.

Horticulture was not part of Melissa's career plans when she graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Environment Planning at the University of Waikato.

"It's a bit of a joke among my friends that avocados became an accidental career for me because I didn't study horticulture at uni."

Two days after finishing her final exam, she became NZ Avocado's industry systems associate, with a focus on quality systems, looking at the changes which could be implemented across the supply chain.

“

Taking part in the Young Grower competitions has helped expand not only her industry knowledge, but her personal development and commitment to an industry she has become passionate about

"Over the past few years, I have come to realise how many opportunities avocados and the wider horticultural industry offers, which extend far beyond picking, packing and the supply chain," she says.



Melissa Bennett (née van den Heuvel) won the 2021 Young Grower of the Year national title

It was while working at NZ Avocado that Melissa was encouraged to enter the 2020 Bay of Plenty Young Grower of the Year competition, subsequently taking out the regional title.

When she competed in the Young Grower of the Year national finals in October 2021, she had taken up the role as avocado grower services representative at Apata Group Limited.

In winning the national title, Melissa continued the legacy of women in the Bay of Plenty horticulture industry, which began in 2017 when Te Puke fruit grower Erin Atkinson became the first woman to win the Young Grower of the Year title in its 11-year history. The next year, AVOCO technical advisor, Danni van der Heijden - also from the Bay of Plenty - won the title.

“Both Erin and Danni have been among my mentors and I am sure the coaching they gave helped me win, as did the guidance and support from both NZ Avocado and Apata,” says Melissa.

Taking part in the Young Grower competitions has helped expand not only her industry knowledge, but her personal development and commitment to an industry she has become passionate about.

In her grower services role at Apata, Melissa works closely alongside orchard owners in the western Bay of Plenty.

“I also have one grower at Hot Water Beach in the Coromandel. “Our team is responsible for making sure our exporter AVOCO has enough fruit each week to meet its orders and that the fruit standards are compliant for the different markets. This includes scheduling the harvests on each orchard.”



Written tasks were among the challenges Melissa Bennett completed on her way to winning the 2021 Young Grower of the Year competition

Despite her youth, growers respect Melissa’s scientific and industry knowledge and her fresh perspective on growing.

“Many of my growers wouldn’t want to admit it but they have been orcharding probably longer than I’ve been alive. I learn a lot from them,” she says. “I’m a firm believer that we don’t know how to grow avocados perfectly and that we are constantly learning and looking closely at growing, picking and packing, thinking about how to do better and where to improve the supply chain so the consumer gets even better fruit.”

Owning an orchard is one of Melissa’s long-term goals and with that in mind she has invested some of her winnings from the awards.

“**It’s a bit of a joke among my friends that avocados became an accidental career for me**

“The sponsors were very generous and the prize packages were wonderful. I did splurge and buy a mountain bike, but I did ‘the grown-up thing’ and spent money on renovations to our home in Matamata and in investments,” says Melissa, who each day commutes from the Waikato to Tauranga for work.

Keen to see others benefit from the regional and national competition experience, Melissa is encouraging all young growers to consider entering, including some of her Apata work colleagues whom she is happy to help mentor, as she was mentored herself. ●



BIGGER AND BETTER THINGS FOR JOINT WINNERS



Craig Botting - horticulture a broad but close-knit industry

There has been plenty of change in the working lives of Craig Botting and Austin Singh Purewal - the joint winners of the 2019 Pukekohe Young Vegetable Grower of the Year Competition. GLENYS CHRISTIAN reports.

Craig's career in horticulture began upon completion of his Diploma of Agriculture at Lincoln University. After working on an arable farm, Craig spent a season abroad during the grain harvest in Canada, later applying for an ad on TradeMe for a planting supervisor and tractor operator at Scottfresh - growers of lettuce and broccoli in north Canterbury.

Successful in his application, Craig, 27 at the time, was encouraged by Scottfresh to enter the competition. He was the only South Island finalist in the competition that year.

"I most enjoyed getting to know the other contestants," Craig says. "I learned a lot about growing in different parts of the country and the leadership training built up a lot more confidence in my speaking ability."

At the end of 2020 he returned to his family's sheep and beef farm out of Balclutha. Horticulture beckoned again in August 2021, when Craig joined Southern Cross Produce based in Woodlands, Invercargill, as a tractor machinery operator.



Austin Singh Purewal - never miss an opportunity

"I was looking for a horticultural job closer to family and friends," he says.

The company's principles and values around looking after the soil attracted him most, he says.

"Good soil produces the highest value crops."

With parsnips, carrots, potatoes, brassicas and brussels sprouts being grown, the operation felt quite different at first, but soon became more familiar.

Craig's time in pastoral agriculture cemented his passion for the horticultural industry.

"There are so many good things about it," Craig says. "It's a broad industry but quite close-knit and there are a lot of ideas out there."

He remains determined to enter the competition again despite the arrival of Covid-19 making it more difficult. But he takes heart from Regan Judd, who won the 2021 Hawke's Bay Young Fruitgrower of the Year competition after first taking out the title in 2019.

"Good on him for giving it another crack."

Austin, who is now 21, was just 16 years old at the time he entered the Young Vegetable Grower of the Year competition. He obtained special permission from the organisers to enter the competition. Two years later and Austin was determined to try for the title once more.

He was not only successful in being named joint winner of the 2019 Pukekohe Young Vegetable Grower of the Year alongside Craig, but also took out the national title in the Young Grower of the Year finals.

At the time, Austin was working as second in charge for his father's company, Purewal Growers, which leases 28 hectares of land around Pukekohe to grow brassicas, spinach, parsley and herbs.

Austin says the most beneficial aspect of the competition was making new connections and extending his industry networks, which weren't as developed because of his age.

"I found a lot of likeminded people," he says.

Soon after the competition, Austin moved to T&G Global as a key accounts manager, which he credits for broadening his horizons. He first worked in covered crops and later in summer crops. After two years at T&G, Austin returned to Purewal Growers as part of a business expansion. He took up the role of head of sales and finance in November 2020 and has relished the opportunity to put his ideas forward to his brother, Amrik, who is head of operations and his father, Chanjit, who is chief executive.

"There's a lot of trust there," he says. "We're expanding the windows for our crops and presenting new opportunities for customers."

He counts himself lucky to have been selected for HortNZ's graduate programme in 2020, valuing the leadership and wellbeing skills it taught him. He was master of ceremonies at last year's Young Vegetable Grower of the Year Competition in Pukekohe and not long after, was nominated by local Member of Parliament, Andrew Bayly, to be part of the week-long Aspiring Leaders' Forum in Wellington.

"It showed me how you could use your own beliefs and morals to help you be a leader," he says.

He's the youngest member of the Pukekohe Vegetable Growers' Association's (PVGA) executive committee and says the mentorship of president, Kylie Faulkner, has been an aspect he particularly appreciates.

"She's given me some different views to guide me," Austin says.

While he's still actively searching out more avenues for learning and personal growth, Austin makes sure he uses every chance to speak to young people who may be interested in working in horticulture.

Last year, he took part in manning the PVGA stand at the Franklin Careers Expo where local school pupils have the opportunity to explore some of the employment options available to them. Of course, he was quick to sell all that horticulture has to offer.

"I wish someone had told me to take every opportunity," he says. "And if it's not there you've got to create it. ●"

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OPPORTUNITIES ABOUND FOR YOUTH IN HORTICULTURE



Erin Atkinson, pictured here in 2017, was the first woman to win the national title of Young Grower of the Year

As the next Young Grower of the Year competition draws closer, we revisit the first woman to win the national title. HELENA O'NEILL talks to 2017 Young Grower of the Year, Erin Atkinson, about why the horticulture industry is a great place to be.

Reflecting on her national title win more than four years ago, Erin still feels a sense of achievement both for herself and the industry, as she witnesses other women taking out the top prize.

"It was amazing, totally unexpected, I guess. I know I worked hard and there was a really great group of competitors," Erin says. "Danni [van der Heijden] went on to win it after me and then Melissa [Van den Heuvel] won it last year. Both from the Bay of Plenty, both repping [sic]."

Erin says the Young Grower of the Year competition gave her the ability to continue to do the job she loves – horticultural promotion. Since winning, she has become the chair of the Bay of Plenty Young Fruit Grower Upskilling Committee that organises the regional Young Grower competition but also runs educational events.

"We do a 'Cultivate Your Career' event, which unfortunately we haven't been able to run due to Covid-19, but we're still trying to do all of that stuff to bring in those high school students."

She is also a member of the Women in Kiwifruit Network committee which reformed last March, replacing the Zespri-led group, on which she currently serves as chair.

Organising events during a pandemic is not an easy task, but Erin is happy with how both committees have met the challenges created by the uncertainty.

More people have attended the Women in Kiwifruit Network events since moving online, which offers great opportunities, she says.

"We're becoming more agile and adapting to it quite well. We've changed a lot of our events to being online and what's been really cool is that we can target a wider audience out of our region. Kiwifruit isn't just in the Bay of Plenty, we can get into Gisborne, Nelson, Northland, Auckland and beyond. We can also tap into other groups to share our messages too."

Erin has seen an increase in the number of women working with kiwifruit over the years and hopes to see that trend continue across the wider industry.

"In the last five years in the kiwifruit industry, I have seen so many great women in their early-to-mid 20s who are absolutely smashing it at the moment. Watching them go from strength to strength is wonderful."

“

Erin has seen an increase in the number of women working with kiwifruit over the years

Erin works as the Apata GROW manager for Apata Group Ltd. Apata GROW offers orchard management for kiwifruit growers specialising in providing on-orchard and technical services to maximise crop performance. The role offers plenty of opportunities to develop Erin's skills and career.

"We've got an amazing culture here and they've been really great in terms of pathways. We're just going from strength to strength developing those career pathways for people. It's been fantastic."



Erin Atkinson during the competition

I've had three job titles in the seven years that I've worked here. Each time I'm working up to a different role.

"It's been really helpful for us recruiting because if you can see people that are staying here and have moved through the company then I think it's a good sign that the company is doing well.

"It's the longest job that I've had to be honest - and I'm still not finished. There's heaps of stuff I want to do within the company."

This year Erin was also selected for the Kiwifruit Vine Health (KVH) associate director role which is a two-year internship offering a chance for professional development. Run since 2014, the programme offers an opportunity for a kiwifruit industry future leader to join the KVH board and gain experience in governance, leadership and strategy while bringing his or her own industry knowledge and experience to the board table. The associate director also has the opportunity to be mentored by an industry leader and receive governance training.

"I get to sit and have active involvement in what's happening in the KVH space at board level and learn about governance and mentoring. For me, it's about that really great opportunity to give back to an industry that has given so much to me.

"I had my first board meeting in February and I went out of there thinking that's a lot to take on, but it was also exciting."

Thinking back on her experience with the Young Grower competition, Erin says it gave her an opportunity to brush up on her existing skillset while developing new ones.

"It really helped me tap back into things I hadn't done for a while. I found it really cool that I got to recap the soil science and nutrient management knowledge. The business aspect was great as well because you got some insight into the business world, things you wouldn't normally cover in your day-to-day jobs.

"It's helped me with my current role in running a division as I have to look at balance sheets, look at profit and loss, budgets and actuals as well."

Erin entered the regional competition twice, before taking out the title the second time around. If a young horticulturalist is considering taking part in the event but isn't quite sure, she urges them to give it a go.

"It's an amazing opportunity to meet like-minded people. It's a great way to learn new skills that you otherwise wouldn't have. The professional development that you get attached to these competitions as well, through to the sponsors and what they have to offer.

"It gave me a really good insight into what a great industry we are part of. This industry is really big on helping young people through it." ●



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GROWING OPPORTUNITIES FOR RANGATAHI



Anthony Taueki at the Clearwater Power Station intake in Canterbury

Anthony Taueki is “shaking the tree” and opening people’s minds up about the horticulture industry, from education through to careers. ANNE HARDIE reports.

Father of four and of Ngāti Kahungunu descent, Anthony is passionate about helping rangatahi find pathways to careers in horticulture. He is doing that on multiple levels, from teaching those in the workforce through to working with government officials.

Anthony is Fruition Horticulture’s regional coordinator for the Hawke’s Bay Tū Te Wana programme, run for rangatahi aged between 15 and 19. The programme follows a holistic model that takes students through to National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) level 2, but also addresses health and wellbeing, whakapapa, industry and fitness.

Anthony wishes the programme had been available when he first joined the industry. After leaving school at 15, he worked in a sawmill until he found his feet in horticulture at the age of 19. Starting out as a seasonal worker in a packhouse and doing general jobs around the orchard didn’t necessarily lead to a career path though. It was only by clawing his way up through the ranks and working with a mentor, that he found his way.

Now Anthony is doing his part to remove the stigma around horticulture and other primary industries, and changing the way the industry trains its young workforce. Today’s horticulture scene is vastly different to what it was back in the 1980s or ’90s, he says, when a job in horticulture was seen as labour intensive. Technology and efficiencies in growing systems have changed the industry dramatically and the workforce with it. Instead of photos of fruit, he wants to see more pictures of the careers and jobs now connected to horticulture such as human resources and marketing.

“

Now Anthony is doing his part to remove the stigma around horticulture and other primary industries, and changing the way the industry trains its young workforce

“With our Tū Te Wana programme, we go and explore what people in the horticulture industry are doing. I encourage more employers to open their doors to what they do. If we really, truly want to attract talent, we have to open all those doors.”

In a time of change in education, Anthony says vocational education providers are in a good position to revamp vocational pathways. He doesn't think those pathways have kept pace with industry and says they need to be updated regularly.

“

As the industry progresses forward, the unit standards representing our apprenticeships need to reflect how the industry is now

“Is what we are doing in our educational space fit for purpose? The industry and technology have changed,” he says. “As the industry progresses forward, the unit standards representing our apprenticeships need to reflect how the industry is now. And that we are doing what is right for this generation.”

In line with that, Anthony says: “I do what I preach and review the course twice a year to make sure we are up to date with the correct content.”

Anthony also wants to expand the conversation around career opportunities to retain the existing workforce. He says careers in horticulture don't always have to progress upwards; they can also progress horizontally. On an orchard, managers usually stay in the job long term, so not everyone is going to become an orchard manager, but he says there are numerous other opportunities that need to be discussed to retain staff rather than focusing on negatives.

“It's staying focused so you don't lose sight of the trees when you are running through the weeds.”

Anthony's passion to help the next generation into horticulture careers and the wider primary sector led to his selection to the council for the Food and Fibre Youth Network, which provides a youth voice on environmental and industry issues. He now has a 2022 Nuffield New Zealand Farming Scholarship, where his research topic is *'growing opportunities from the roots up.'*

“Shaking the tree” is Anthony's call to action: “Ehara taku toa i te toa takitahi, engari he toa takitini - success is not the work of one, but the work of many.” ●

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SPRINGING INTO A HORTICULTURAL FUTURE



Allie Telfer encourages other young people to look at what horticulture careers have to offer them

Allie Telfer knows exactly where she would have been without the Springboard Community Works programme mentoring and encouraging her into a future in horticulture. GLENYS CHRISTIAN speaks to the 20-year-old about her journey so far and her newfound niche in horticulture.

Allie Telfer started work at Warkworth's Southern Paprika in July last year in the payroll and human resources administration group and has quickly become a valued member of the team.

She now sees horticulture as very much part of her future.

"I probably wouldn't have been alive [without it]."

She admits she knew little about Southern Paprika's growing operation when she applied for work there.

"I was blown away by what goes into the business which I've loved learning more about," she says. "It's amazing. I like to know the how and why behind things."

Before employment at Southern Paprika, Allie says she struggled with mental health.

At school she faced abuse and bullying which led her to suffer from anxiety and depression.

As a result, she left school at 15 and attempted to complete school lessons online.

"I got into partying," she says. "My head wasn't in the right space."

After coming to the attention of the Police, Allie was referred to Springboard - a programme creating opportunities for young people to achieve positive outcomes and pathways to success.

"I had all round support and encouragement, and I was taught life skills," she says.

After spending time in Australia, she worked for a couple of years in her father's automotive workshop, handling reception and accounts. She started a Diploma of Business Management which is now near completion, but Allie wanted more for her future as she saw cars would become increasingly electric.

"Horticulture is going to be around forever," she says. "So, we've got to invest in it, as vegetables are where we get our vitamins and nutrition."

With nothing taught about horticulture through her schooling, she's a firm believer that there should be more school tours of enterprises such as Southern Paprika.

"People should be going in and explaining what goes on behind the scenes," she says.

"It's something that pupils would want to get involved in, but it's not pushed like building or construction."

And a lot of school pupils think horticultural work is too hard, she says.

"They want to jump on their phones and be YouTubers. But the hardest work brings the most rewards."

She's been intrigued to find out more about the back story of capsicums and just how much coordination is required to run a large-scale business. She's proud of the company's emphasis on sustainability though water recycling, using biodegradable strings to tie the plants up, the use of coco-peat as a growing medium and feeding non-saleable produce to cows on a neighbouring farm.

"Nothing goes to waste."

A recent trip to the company's avocado plantings at Tapora, on the edge of the Kaipara Harbour, gave her a real insight into just what's required to put them on the shelves for shoppers.

"I loved that side of things," she says.

She's also enjoyed finding out more about the different cultures that make up Southern Paprika's 150-strong workforce, with those from Tuvalu and Kiribati using their employment to build a future for their families.

"I feel grounded here doing something that's good for the environment, employees and the community," she says. "You need to give people a chance. You can't judge a book by its cover."

Loving the organisational side of things, she wants to build on her management skills and learn how to lead people.

"I have a new sense of direction, a boost to my confidence and I feel I can do something good in the world," she says. "I think I'll be working in horticulture for a long time."

Springboard founder, Gary Diprose, set up the programme in 2002 after PGG Wrightson was asked to provide an alternative education programme for pupils expelled from Mahurangi and Rodney Colleges. The company pulled out after 18 months and a trust was formed in 2004, which became known as Springboard Community Works. The Police asked Gary to work with other youth offenders and now Springboard, with a staff of 30, caters for 270 young people a year ranging from eight to 25-year-olds.

"We get to know young people and give them hope for the future," he says. "It's a holistic and community approach."

From its new base at Sheepworld, north of Warkworth, Springboard plans to extend its wide range of employment training and options for young people further into horticulture.

"They do need a lot of support to transition," he says. "But then they get the whole feeling of working in a real work environment. Some are absolute stars and make a massive success of it. And that has a ripple effect." ●



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FIVE-YEAR RESEARCH PROGRAMME CREATES WATER TOOLS TO BENEFIT GROWERS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Anne Hardie



Irrigation Insight programme leader Dr MS Srinivasan talks with one of the pilot farmers

A five-year research programme named Irrigation Insight has produced tools to help growers and farmers use water more efficiently, at less cost, for a better environmental outcome.

The research programme concluded late last year using several pilot dairy farms in Canterbury and resulted in the development of a range of online, real-time tools including two that can be used for both horticulture and agriculture irrigation.

These online tools are based on NIWA's advanced weather forecasting system and on-farm rainfall and soil moisture monitoring to understand the soil and drainage. For both growers and farmers, it means they can now use these tools to better manage irrigation on individual properties.

The programme, funded by the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE), was a collaboration between the pilot farmers, NIWA, DairyNZ, Fonterra, AgResearch and Irrigation New Zealand.

At the heart of the programme are weather stations situated on each individual property which provide property-specific information.

The NIWA-operated weather stations provide information to a regional weather forecasting system. Every six hours, NIWA generates high-resolution (every 1.5km) weather forecasts that are corrected for terrain and local weather observations to provide the best estimates of rainfall, temperature and wind at the individual property scale.

“

The programme aims to help growers and farmers understand the economic impacts of their irrigation management choices

NIWA principal scientist and Irrigation Insight programme leader, Dr MS Srinivasan, says the programme aims to help growers and farmers understand the economic impacts of their irrigation management choices. To do that, the pilot project has captured a range of economic information such as changes in electricity usage, changes in pasture growth due to changes in irrigation, the cost of water and the potential loss of nutrients below the root zone via drainage.



Using science to irrigate better

The programme focused on developing tools that could collect and interpret data for growers and farmers to make irrigation decisions. The tools take into account rainfall, irrigation, solar radiation, relative humidity, wind speed, soil moisture and temperature from the surface down to 8cm below, pasture production, river flow and water use, combined with knowledge of climatic, soil, specific on-farm irrigation practices, irrigation infrastructure, irrigation supply-demand dynamics and the high-resolution weather forecasting. That data is telemetered every hour and is available for growers and farmers 24/7, in real time. In short, a lot of information at their fingertips that is easy to understand and use.

The research produced three tools: IrriMate, IrriSET and SoilMate.

IrriSET is an irrigation strategy evaluation tool that is currently pasture-specific, while IrriMate can be used across any crop. It is an operational tool that works out how much irrigation is needed on a given day, incorporating soil properties, current soil moisture, future rainfall, evapotranspiration and costs of irrigation to help growers and farmers choose when and how they irrigate. It is designed for efficient on-farm irrigation and it does that through what is termed an 'Insight Plot'. The Insight Plot visualises measured and forecast soil moisture movement, weather forecasts and potential pasture growth. It shows soil water conditions within and below the root zone, the effect of drainage and daily pasture growth linked to the available soil water within the root zone.

Dr Srinivasan says the Insight Plot enables farmers to understand complex information immediately, using real-time and localised data. IrriMate also includes long-term records that capture a grower or farmer's irrigation behaviour over time which can then be used to demonstrate best irrigation management practises to regulators.



Irrigation Insight data can be accessed on the phone

SoilMate is a mobile soil moisture sensor that measures the variability within an individual property. It combines soil water measurements and NIWA's high-resolution weather forecast to provide a site-specific six-day soil moisture forecast. Growers and farmers can use it around their property to fill the data gaps to give them more confidence in their decision making.

NIWA's principal scientist, Graham Elley, says the challenge now is turning Irrigation Insight into a commercial service that helps those making irrigation decisions. That may be via a subscriber service to NIWA, though it is also in discussions with other technology providers.

“ The programme focused on developing tools that could collect and interpret data for growers and farmers to make irrigation decisions

He says there is an acceptance the programme makes a difference and they now need to ensure its benefits are realised so it is not left on the shelf. He suggests the outcome of the programme will depend largely on demand from both irrigators and regulatory bodies.

For now, the programme continues to work with dairy farmers through irrigation schemes which he says all have their own environmental challenges.

Dr Srinivasan says the next step is working out how they take this science further and provide growers and farmers with the information to support their daily management and strategic planning of water use over the next 20 years in a changing climate. ●



DIVERSITY AND CREATIVITY SEE BOUTIQUE TOMATO GROWERS THROUGH TURBULENT TIMES

Photography; Trefor Ward



Anthony (L) and Angela (R) Tringham with an armful of their tomatoes



Sophie Frizzell removing laterals from the tomato plants

In rolling country east of Auckland is a boutique tomato grower cultivating more than 50 varieties of tomatoes. While small in scale, the operation's unique produce has not only set itself apart from other major industry players but has helped in withstanding the ongoing vexations of Covid-19. GEOFF LEWIS reports.

Owned by Anthony and Angela Tringham, Curious Croppers employs just 15 people, producing approximately 40 tonnes of their tomato varieties in a typical year. From the usual red, green and yellow varieties to purple, orange and near-black, then gob-stopper sized varieties, to pumpkin-sized and more.

Like many other boutique producers in the region, Curious Croppers' key clientele is the Auckland restaurant scene. But that all came to a crashing halt in 2020, with the pandemic plunging Anthony and Angela into an ongoing chapter of Covid uncertainty.

The saga began with the first lockdown in March 2020, as Anthony explains.

"We knew the restaurants would be shut but we didn't know when they would open again," he says. "Our choice was spending \$200,000 to put the whole crop in - or we could do nothing and lose \$100,000. We had to look at where we could make economies."

The rollercoaster ride of Covid-19 has required Anthony and Angela to call on all their resources, friends, family members, long-time supporters and anyone else they could persuade into helping out - just to keep the business afloat.

"The good thing is that once the first lockdown was over, and the restaurants did open properly, they were very busy because a lot of people who couldn't go overseas still had money and wanted to spend it dining out."

The reopening of restaurants was enough to keep Curious Croppers in business, but the biggest problem was come harvest.

"Our problem was our new season started at the time of the 2021 lockdown and the restaurants were closed," says Anthony. "We did a lot of gate sales, people would text in an order we'd put it in boxes at the gate."

"We also had a lot of support from industry. Farro's would buy as much as they could."

Anthony and Angela got creative too, selling their tomatoes as a "pop-up" shop at the Long Room in Ponsonby.

"Our friends Andrew and Richard [the owners] opened their premises and we sold boxes and boxes of tomatoes from their courtyard."

The Ponsonby experience was a revelation, Angela says.

"Some of our tomatoes weigh more than 1kg. We went to Ponsonby and people would ask, "how much?" We'd say "Ten dollars each," and they'd say, "Okay, we'll have five."

"You should have seen the foot traffic. We were selling entertainment rather than tomatoes. It was something we'd never seen before."

An Auckland food network called 'Lazy Susan' also helped keep the Tringhams' sales going through the pandemic.

"They wanted to help and asked how many boxes we need to sell," says Angela. "The message went out to everyone on their list, advertised at \$55 a box - restaurant-quality, wholesale prices. We sold 1.7 tonnes of tomatoes. Their customers wanted to know why we couldn't do more and we cleared two weeks of production."

Anthony says the secret to keeping in business during Covid has been getting everyone they know to buy tomatoes - and they found many people willing to help.

"We went to our friends and family to buy [tomatoes] and our friends helped us by going to their neighbours to sell our tomatoes," Anthony says. "It's five-times as much work, but better than chucking the produce away."

Having experienced two seasons of uncertainties, Anthony admits he and Angela are a little more nervous about what's coming next.

"If staff have to self-isolate due to Covid it could quickly throw our planting [schedule] out of control," he says. "It's not the sickness so much as the disruption."

"It has been a complicated time. We usually see what people like and plant more of that next season. The first season under Covid was a muddle. We survived the second season and we're now at seeds again. We need to plant what we can sell, but we're not sure what we're going to plant. It's a bit of a nightmare."

Despite the challenges, Angela says New Zealand is lucky it hasn't been hit quite so hard as what was seen in Australia.

"In the Red traffic light system, we're just going to carry on growing," she says. "The restaurants are still going, even with limits on numbers of customers." ●

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IMPORTANT REMINDER FOR GROWERS AROUND OFF-LABEL USE OF PRODUCTS

Stephen Salter : Market Access Solutionz

Off-label use of crop protection products is needed to manage pests, diseases and weeds in a number of minor crops. While the practice is legal, growers are responsible for ensuring that off-label use is necessary, safe and compliant. There are important steps that growers need to follow to ensure correct products are used and that residue levels are within regulatory and customer limits.

Off-label use occurs when growers need to use a product to control a pest, disease or weed – but the label does not carry a claim for that crop or target. While the flexibility of being able to use crop protection products off-label is critical to New Zealand growers, they are unable to rely on label directions to ensure regulatory controls are complied with. Without label guidance, there is a risk that off-label use may result in exceedance of maximum residue limits (MRLs) or other compliance breaches. Results from residue testing programmes over several years show where residue levels exceeded MRLs (Maximum Residue Levels), these incidents were sometimes due to products being used off-label.

The Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI) conducts a Food Residue Surveillance Programme which monitors residues on a range of domestic and imported fruit and vegetables. Residue non-compliance in this project can be as a result of off-label use where no MRL is set and the New Zealand default of 0.1mg/kg applies, or where off-label use of the product is not allowed and consequently any detection of the active is a non-compliance. MRL non-compliances can have serious and negative financial implications for growers, so ensuring that all growers understand the rules and requirements for each crop protection product used – and how to comply with all controls – is important.

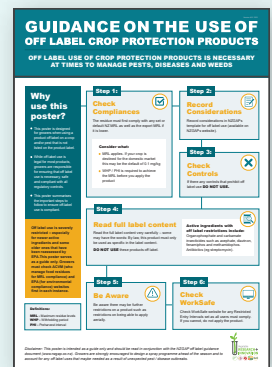
To attempt to address this issue, NZGAP produces guidance on the use of off-label crop protection products. This is updated annually and growers, particularly of minor crops, are strongly encouraged to read this.

All growers who use products off-label should read this document. It provides practical information to help meet regulatory requirements under the Agricultural Compounds & Veterinary Medicines (ACVM) Act, Hazardous Substances and New Organisms (HSNO) Act, Health and Safety at Work Act (HSWA) and Food Act.

The 2022 Guidance has been updated with two new appendices:

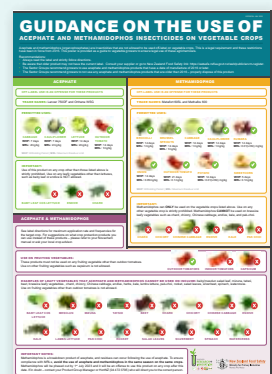
1 Off-label use poster

The Vegetable Research & Innovation (VR&I) board produced a downloadable poster designed for growers when using a product off-label on a crop or pest that is not registered on the label.



2 Acephate and Methamidophos poster

The VR&I board also produced a downloadable guidance poster for vegetable growers to ensure legal use of the two actives, acephate and methamidophos. The insecticides acephate and methamidophos (organophosphates) are not allowed to be used off-label on vegetable crops. This is a legal requirement and these restrictions have been in force since 2015.



Links to each of these posters are included in the new off-label guidance document. Hard copies can also be sent to you by contacting your business manager.

Before the season commences, when designing or updating spray plans, growers should carefully consider what products may need to be used off-label. The document provides a decision tree for determining if a product can be used off-label as well as a checklist for ensuring compliance. It is recommended that growers' considerations and decision making around off-label use of a product are documented and lodged in their spray diary.

WorkSafe and regional plan requirements must also be met. This includes tasks such as complying with neighbour notification, buffer zones, re-entry intervals and signage requirements.

These off-label use guidelines are not an exhaustive list of all steps growers must take to ensure regulatory compliance, particularly with regard to WorkSafe and regional council requirements which can differ from region to region. Requirements will also vary between growers because what is a "reasonably practicable" step to take to ensure the safety of your workers and bystanders will depend on many factors in each operation. Whilst some WorkSafe requirements are specific, such as thresholds over which signage is required, others are based around the principle of eliminating and minimising risks to health and safety so far as is reasonably practicable. ●



The 2022 version of the off-label guideline document is available here: <https://www.nzgap.co.nz/guidelines>

If you have further queries, please contact NZGAP: info@nzgap.co.nz, or your product group manager.



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REMOTE ISLAND HOME NO BARRIER TO HORTICULTURE HIRING

Elaine Fisher



The first woman to receive instant online employment confirmation, Ashlyne Kauha displays the email confirming her appointment

From her home on a remote Pacific island, Ashlyne Kauha used the online hiring tool, PICMI, to apply for and receive instant confirmation of her appointment to a horticulture role in New Zealand – becoming the first woman to do so.

“Ashlyne was so proud of what she had achieved, she posted photos of herself in her national costume showing the email which confirmed her seasonal role with the Reekie Family Trust in Te Puke,” says PICMI co-founder, Genevieve Griffin-George.

Ashlyne, from the remote island of Tanna in Vanuatu, previously would have had to take a three-day trip to Port Vila to apply for the job. She has since gone on to help others in her village apply for and gain work through the PICMI system.

Ashlyne’s success began with an inquiry from Michelle Reekie of the Reekie Family Trust, asking if the same PICMI technology she used to hire staff in New Zealand could also work on an island in the Pacific.

“We said yes it could and set about making it happen,” says Genevieve.

Michelle sent Ashlyne an email with a link inviting her to apply for the job. Ashlyne opened the link and then filled out the information required, reviewed the contract, and signed an agreement to work for the Reekie Family Trust. She was also able to securely share her personal details with her employer. Once the contract was digitally signed, Ashlyne received confirmation of her appointment to the role.

“We had been communicating with Ashlyne via Facebook and were so excited when she completed the process and got the job,” says Genevieve.

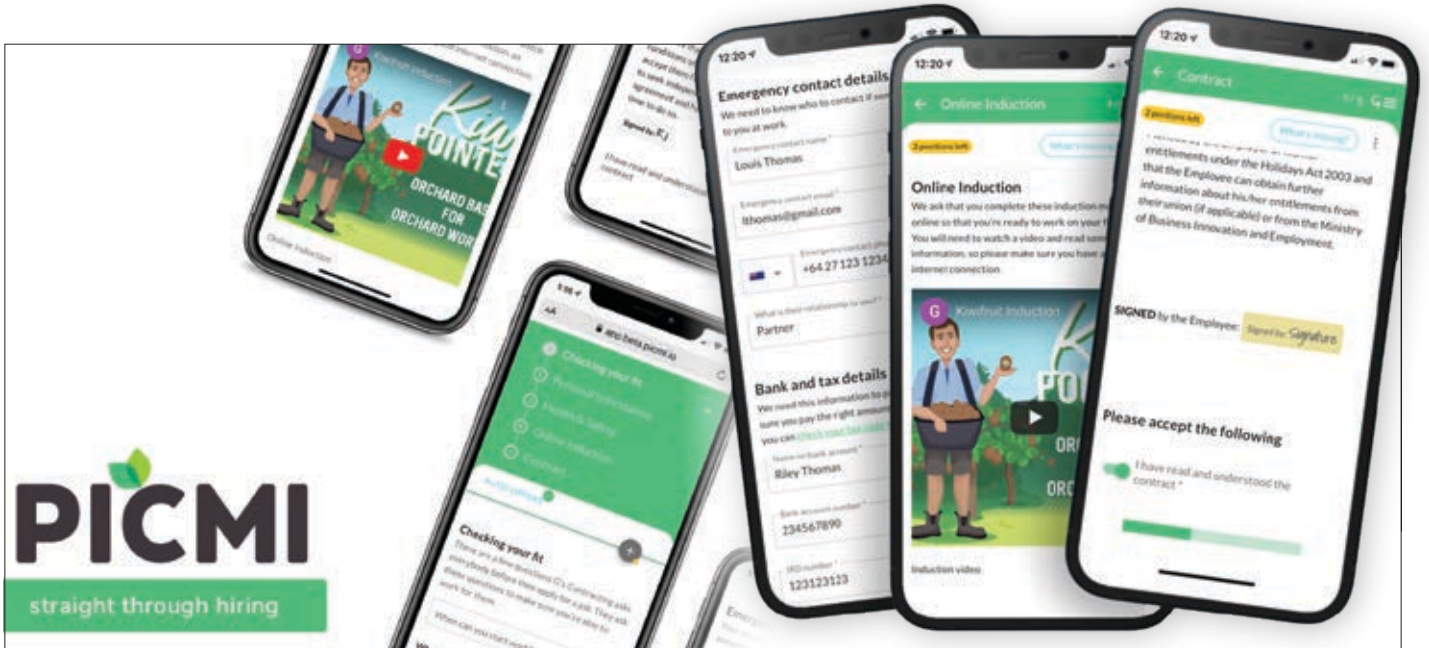
As contracts signed through PICMI meet all the requirements of New Zealand employment law, the Reekie Family Trust was able to use Ashlyne’s contract and those of others who accepted jobs, to start the visa application process earlier than usual. The first team of eight from Vanuatu began working at its Te Puke orchards before Christmas.

By contrast, many Vanuatu Recognised Seasonal Employer Scheme (RSE) job seekers add weeks to their application process because they must travel from their islands to the capital, Port Vila, to complete forms and medical checks. Employers must also wait and constantly check progress before starting the visa application process.

Genevieve says using PICMI to confirm employment is life changing for RSE workers in the Pacific. The tool dramatically reduces the time, travel and expense previously involved in applying for work.

“**Using PICMI to confirm employment is life changing for RSE workers in the Pacific. The tool dramatically reduces the time, travel and expense previously involved in applying for work**”

“Covid has been very hard for them and the time and money previously required to apply for work has added to that,” Genevieve says. “PICMI is helping speed up the process and reduce stress.”



Michelle says processing documentation through the right people in the right order is difficult and time-consuming.

“Doing it digitally skips all the unnecessary duplication that costs time and money. In our case, going direct means we don’t send documents to an agent who passes them to the Vanuatu labour services which make duplicates and then require our prospective workers to travel from outer Islands to sign the documents and then return the documents with a signature back to us.

“What’s even more important to us is that our workers feel good about themselves by being able to sign immediately and have a contract.”

“**They have collectively hired thousands of people through PICMI in the past six months and 60 percent of the jobseekers are New Zealanders**

Genevieve says more New Zealanders than ever are now using PICMI to accept seasonal employment across almost the entire horticultural sector.

“We’ve got customers across New Zealand in berries, summerfruit, kumara, hops, kiwifruit and apples. They have collectively hired thousands of people through PICMI in the past six months and 60 percent of the jobseekers are New Zealanders.

“The technology also allows induction to be carried out online, so employees arrive on the job with an understanding of the business and what the work entails.

“Employers report a better calibre of employee coming through, as someone who has made the commitment to fill in the application form, share their information and complete the induction process, has shown a commitment to the job.

“Instead of hours of paperwork, employers also have more time to spend with staff on the important things, like pastoral care and training, which is what they really want to do.” ●



PICMI’s co-founder Genevieve Griffin-George is delighted the on-line hiring technology is benefiting RSE workers in the Pacific



BIG OPPORTUNITIES FOR FOOD IN HEALTH AND WELLNESS



Elaine Fisher



Alice Moore, general manager of BerryCo



Mountain Blue Orchard (MBO) Southern Highbush varieties of blueberries are highly sought-after

Wellness is now the biggest food opportunity of our lifetime, says Alice Moore, general manager of BerryCo.

"The health and wellness food category has been spurred on by Covid-19 with more and more people exploring how they can eat themselves into better health," says Alice, who is also a member of Women in Horticulture and is based in the Bay of Plenty.

"Clearly established links between the types of foods we eat and nutrition, mental, emotional and physical health, mean consumers are more aware than ever of what goes into their bodies and how food can impact not just physical health but moods and emotional health too."

New Zealand farmers and growers are well placed to be part of this trend with a well-deserved reputation for the high-quality, nutrient dense foods they produce in international markets.

"In particular, blueberries have a strong fit in the wellness space with their status as a superfruit offering the opportunity for high growth," says Alice.

"The blueberry industry is ripe for innovation through both its approach to marketing and improved varieties that offer superior characteristics.

"BerryCo has a distinct advantage with rights to grow and market the highly sought-after Mountain Blue Orchard (MBO) Southern Highbush varieties.

"I was inspired to take the role of general manager by the opportunity to collaborate with and support growers to build production knowledge and capabilities and to drive sustainable value through disciplined sales and marketing programmes."

Alice joined BerryCo in October 2021 after five years managing the Zespri organic kiwifruit portfolio. Prior to that, she spent several years in various commercial and marketing primary sector roles including working for Ballance Agri-Nutrients, National Foods and Dairy Women's Network.

A career in the primary industries didn't initially appeal until Alice spent her latter school years in the hostel at Feilding Agricultural High School.

"I was surrounded by friends who lived on farms and spent a lot of weekends in farm environments which gave me a few 'aha' moments," she says. "The first of these was when a good friend said she wanted to study to become a farm consultant. I couldn't understand why, didn't farmers already know how to farm?"

"The second was when the same friend's father prepared to leave the farm dressed in a business suit, briefcase in hand.

I asked where he was going and he responded he had a board meeting to attend - this blew my mind - farmers have board meetings?

"I soon came to understand there were a wide range of exciting career options in the primary sectors and I am really thankful to my friends for helping me see that. I've stayed in the sector because I love the connection with growers and producers and feel privileged to play my part in supporting the growth of sustainable, healthy communities across New Zealand."

Understanding consumers and what they want is vital to the success of New Zealand food producers, Alice says.

"The consumer has all the power to either purchase our brands or not. We need to understand the drivers behind their decision making to find the best ways to encourage them to purchase."

Building and maintaining a strong connection between the grower and the market is crucial and will become more important as consumers seek transparency and sustainability from the brands they purchase.

"New Zealand producers have great stories to share, however it is important to have a deep understanding

of consumers and their 'why' to help narrow down the stories they want to hear and the language used to weave your tale. Only then will you begin building a meaningful and lasting connection with consumers."

BerryCo has more than 30 growers from the Far North to Motueka. While blueberries were first introduced in the 1950s, growing MBO varieties in New Zealand is relatively new and Alice says there remains much to learn.

"Labour costs are high as blueberries are very labour intensive to pick, which has been magnified by the current labour shortages. While New Zealand achieves acceptable yields, competing countries achieve as good or better.

"The opportunity is in working alongside growers to rapidly build and spread knowledge of how to get the most from MBO varieties in our conditions, and growing a strong consumer brand in berries that communicates a high-quality proposition to consumers in a meaningful way." ●

To keep up-to-date with Women in Horticulture, its news and activities, and join the membership database, email info@women-in-hort.nz
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BERRY BUSINESS GROWN WITH VISION AND PERSISTENCE FACES CHALLENGING YEAR AHEAD

Photography; Trefor Ward



Boman Zakeri with a handful of freshly picked strawberries

At just 28 years of age, Boman Zakeri holds an impressive list of achievements to his name. With vision and a good bit of determination, he has established his own growing venture sustainably producing high quality and delicious fruit to local and export markets. His business provides work for the local community. GEOFF LEWIS speaks with Boman about how he achieved his dream and how he is meeting the challenges of being a grower in these times of change and disruption.

Boman arrived in New Zealand with his family, Hazara people from Afghanistan, in 2004. Today he is managing director of Best Berries – a 40-hectare strawberry and raspberry growing operation at Riverhead, just north of Auckland City.

It's a cooperative affair with the family living nearby. His sisters help with the financial side and in managing the packhouse.

Boman's interest in growing strawberries began in his mid-teens during one of his first horticulture jobs.

"One day I was picking and wished I owned a farm like this – so it was meant to be," he says.

“

Best Berries grows a number of strawberry varieties including the popular Camarosa and Ventana. Boman has a small area planted in raspberries too

Being young and a bit naïve, the journey wasn't easy, he says. The people Boman approached to buy or lease land from didn't take him seriously due to his age, but after some persistence he finally came across a mentor who guided him and provided some growing space. Boman leased four hectares in the Riverhead area at first before going on to buy his current site in 2011.

"It's called the 'Golden Triangle'," he says. "Free-draining soil, a good microclimate. The area is known for apples, grapes and potatoes and being so close to the city, [it] has a big market and a ready supply of labour. The business has evolved every year with a lot of support from my family."

Best Berries grows a number of strawberry varieties including the popular Camarosa and Ventana. Boman has a small area planted in raspberries too. About 80 percent of the crop goes to the supermarkets.

In the last couple of years the farm has been opened to pick-your-own customers, with huge numbers of people turning up on warm summer days this January.

A packhouse and coolstore were added to Best Berries over the past ten years, and last year a \$1 million processing plant was brought into action to make better use of the fruit that isn't accepted by supermarkets or is left behind by the 'Pick Your Own' customers. A proportion of the crop is also exported to several south-east Asian countries.



Visitors can take a 'train' trip around the berry farm. An older tractor stands in for the 'engine' which is currently being serviced

Boman says things are changing in the world of strawberry growing. The early season is influenced by the importation of strawberries from Australia, which doesn't leave much room Kiwi growers.

"With growing strawberries people need to be aware of the costs of production in comparison with what you can get for the product.

"It's going to be a challenging year ahead. Traditionally the season runs from December to the end of January, but more people are finding it difficult to make it work. A lot of growers are down-sizing or pulling plants out."

Then there is the question of how long outdoor growing will remain viable in the face of rising costs and increased adverse weather events, he says.

"We had a very wet November, a weather event which damaged a lot of the flowers and the fruit. That put a bit of stress on us. In December it happened again, a downpour and a lot of damage. Workers who would normally finish in January finished just after Christmas as it was not viable to carry on."

Finding labour at the right time is a challenge throughout the industry, made more so by Covid-19 restrictions, Boman says.

Then there are the rising costs, include a raft of regulatory demands from central government including the introduction of the living wage, carbon emissions, water and climate change policies - making day-to-day costs more expensive and more complex. ●



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WATERMELON GROWER HITS THE SWEET SPOT

Photography; Kristine Walsh



"The ability to listen to a plant - and respond - can take a long time to develop but once that knowledge is there, you have it forever," says Gisborne grower Isikeli Maka

Great timing and a swag of generational knowledge have helped a Gisborne grower produce a sweet and unique New Zealand crop. KRISTINE WALSH reports.

If there is one thing Isikeli Maka has learned in his 50-plus years of working the land, it is that timing is everything.

Back in his home country of Tonga, the cyclone season has growers calculating the best times to plant and harvest.

"If you don't get it right, you will lose everything," Isikeli says. "There is no protection against a cyclone."

That is among the many pearls of wisdom Isikeli brings to the watermelon-growing operation he has established in the East Coast region of Gisborne.

There, a number of major rain events have had a big impact on growers but, against those odds, Isikeli managed to shoehorn his season into a favourable window.

Having prepared the one-hectare block he leases at Manutuke, 15 kilometres from Gisborne city, his seedlings were ready to plant in October with the aim of starting the harvest in early January.

"Then the rain came," Isikeli says, referring to the state-of-emergency-level weather bomb that hit the region towards the end of October.

"That set us back a week but as all the paddocks around us were flooded, it turned out to be lucky. We would have lost the lot."

Despite a turbulent start, Isikeli's half-century of experience produced a fast and furious season - 10,000 plants were in the ground by the end of October; the harvest started on 24 January and in the second week of February they were done.

Most of Isikeli's crop is sold direct to consumers, with fanau (family) coming from around the country to help with the three weeks of harvest and sales.

And for the first year they operated under the newly-formed Isikeli Maka and Fanau Trust (IMFT) which was established to formalise the operation.

In the years Isikeli has been in Gisborne, much of the produce he has grown has been gifted to church, fanau and the community.



**10,000 PLANTS WERE IN THE
GROUND BY THE END OF OCTOBER**



“
After years of experimentation
he has settled on two varieties
- one large, one small - that
grow well in Gisborne, produce
sweet, juicy melons and are even
resistant to pests and disease

“That is why we set up the trust,” says daughter-in-law, Katerina Maka (Te Aitanga-a-Māhaki/Te Whānau-a-Kai), who developed a fresh social media programme for the 2022 season.

“We wanted to make sure Isikeli and his fanau got some return for all the work he puts in and to be able to share his passion. Through his generational knowledge, my own children are learning how to live off the land and that’s what we all want for them.”

Born in 1958, Isikeli Maka is originally from the Tongan island of Tungua, his father working three-hectares of land which, to this day, is traditionally allocated to males over the age of 16.

From a young age Isikeli, his brother and five sisters lived and worked on the main island of Tongatapu to where the fanau had moved to in the mid-1960s.

“Even back then my father was growing Candy Red watermelons to export to New Zealand and was able to lease enough land to expand a bit, to buy us a truck, to make life a bit easier,” Isikeli says.

“All us kids helped from a young age and as I had always wanted to be a grower, that suited me well. I’d see my dad out there nurturing a plant like it was a baby, listening to what it needs and giving it that care and attention.”

The knowledge of being able to listen to a plant - and respond - can take a long time to develop but once it’s there, you have it forever, Isikeli says.

“That’s part of what made my desire to grow so strong ... I’m addicted to it.”

Having sent one of their daughters to New Zealand to be educated, Isikeli’s parents joined her in the early 1980s, bringing with them all of Isikeli’s siblings.

He, however, decided to stay in Tonga and continue to grow produce.

On the island of ‘Eua, the fourth King of Tonga - the late Tāufa‘āhau Tupou IV - awarded him the title of best kumara grower and on the main island of Tongatapu, Princess Salote Mafile‘o Pilolevu Tuita named him best tomato grower.

“It wasn’t a big operation but it was enough to support my family,” Isikeli says. “Then in 2006, I came over to join the rest of my fanau.”

Having gained permanent residency in just a couple of years, his wife Mele and the couple’s six children, joined Isikeli in New Zealand in 2008.

After just a month in Auckland, they moved to Gisborne.

“My brother Sione was here and, with its population, farmland and access to the sea, it reminded me a lot of Tonga. Plus it was a chance to get my kids away from big-city life.”

Once settled, Isikeli soon started work at a wood plant, but even before that he had secured a space to grow kumara to be shared among fanau, the community and his Seventh-day Adventist church.

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WATERMELON FACTS / FIGURES

WATERMELON IS PLANTED BETWEEN OCTOBER AND MID-NOVEMBER IN NEW ZEALAND, WITH HARVEST OCCURRING FROM JANUARY TO MARCH.



A MEMBER OF THE SAME FAMILY AS CUCUMBER AND PUMPKIN, WATERMELON CAN BE CONSIDERED A VEGETABLE, ALTHOUGH AS THE PRODUCT OF A FERTILISED FLOWER IT CAN BE CONSIDERED A FRUIT.



NEW ZEALAND HAS JUST OVER 20 REGISTERED WATERMELON GROWERS, THOUGH SMALLER OPERATORS ARE DOTTED AROUND THE COUNTRY



IN IDEAL CONDITIONS, WATERMELONS CAN PRODUCE UP TO 70 TONNES

A HECTARE, PARTICULARLY IF GIVEN AN EXTENDED PERIOD OF WARM WEATHER TO PRODUCE WELL.

NEW ZEALAND'S MAIN IMPORTS OF WATERMELON COME FROM TONGA - WHERE THE HARVEST RUNS FROM AUGUST UNTIL CHRISTMAS. AUSTRALIA SUPPLIES WATERMELON TOO, HARVESTING THEIR CROP LATER AND OFFERING SOME COMPETITION TO LOCAL GROWERS



FOR THE 2022 SEASON, LEADERBRAND CHOSE TO GROW TWO VARIETIES OF WATERMELONS: A MICRO-SEEDED MELON AND A JUBILEE MELON.

That's a tradition he has continued on different plots over the years. He also grows produce like kumara and kamokamo just down the road from his city-centre home, on land owned by his church. In fact, his taro leaf garden is one of the biggest in the country.

"I do try to meet costs but it is important to have that produce available to the community," he says. "In non-Covid times we can have 1000 people come for a funeral and taro leaf is one of the staple foods we can offer them."

It is the watermelons, though, that are his primary seasonal crop and after years of experimentation he has settled on two varieties - one large, one small - that grow well in Gisborne, produce sweet, juicy melons and are even resistant to pests and disease.

Isikeli says the melons love the hot, dry climate of Gisborne with the main task being to keep them clear of weeds to help protect the plants from damage.

"The soil here is very fertile and that's a good place to start. Then if you have the right knowledge you can increase production many times over," he says.

After timing things just right for the 2022 season, Isikeli hopes to double the size of his leased land and plans to set up a company to further formalise his endeavours.

"I can't go a year without growing things and I love seeing how happy it makes people.

"It is a big part of who I am." ●

DAMAGE TO ISLAND HOME 'DEVASTATING'

The tsunami caused by the eruption of the Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha'apai underwater volcano in mid-January caused massive damage to the islands of Tonga - particularly Isikeli's home island of Tungua and 'Eua, where he later lived.

Occurring at the end of the season, the disaster didn't disrupt watermelon crops - though growers were already impacted by export barriers such as Covid-19 and biosecurity restrictions after fruit fly larvae sightings at the end of 2019.

"But so much else is gone," says Isikeli. "There are pictures of Tungua that show only a concrete water tank left standing. It is devastating."

The arrival of aid also brought its own issues ... after having just one case of Covid-19 during the course of the global pandemic, the kingdom recorded more after the eruption, sending Tongatapu into lockdown by early February.

"It is really sad and we can only hope that the damaged areas can be rebuilt over time," Isikeli says. "You really feel the loss of it when it is your home."

TECHNICAL



THE LATEST INNOVATIONS AND IMPROVEMENTS





AN EXTREME SUMMER FOR NEW ZEALAND



Georgina Griffiths : MetService meteorologist



Figure 1: Auckland hot day count for summer (December - February), taken at 14 February 2022. Even before the summer of 2021/2022 had finished, the hot day count in Auckland had broken records

Unusually humid and warm summers are nothing new for the upper North Island, during La Niña years. All those northeasterly and easterly winds typically produce a humid and warm summer, but don't always deliver the rain.

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MetService

This year, with an underlying baseline of climate change and a marine heatwave, hot day records were a risk for Northland, Auckland and Waikato. In these regions, extreme heat and humidity was experienced this summer.

For Auckland, at the halfway point of February, the summer hot day count broke records. At Auckland Airport, a reliable weather station with records dating back to 1966 (55 summers), the hot day count in mid February 2022 was 51 days (Fig. 1), beating the previous record-holder, the summer of 2017/2018 (49 days).

For Whangārei, at the same point in time (mid-February 2022), the summer hot day count was already 47 days, which ranks as the second highest hot day count in records that began in 1967 (54 summers ago). With two more weeks of summer to go at the time of writing, more hot days are on the cards. However, the record hot summers of 1997/1998 and 2019/2020 (both with 55 hot days) may well keep their crowns, given a cooler southerly regime mid-month.

Extreme summer rainfall for multiple regions, with TC Dovi causing impacts

The summer rainfall regime during 2021/2022 was also extreme, being characterised by long dry spells interspersed by deluge rainfall.

New Zealand experienced a record dry January in many areas - and it was also hotter and sunnier than usual in many places. The following locations recorded less than 10mm of rain in January and ranked within the five lowest January totals: Auckland, Hamilton, Taumarunui, Taupo, New Plymouth, Whanganui, Westport and Hokitika.

“
For Auckland, at the halfway point of February, the summer hot day count broke records

Auckland actually experienced its second longest dry spell on record, ending 23 January - with a run of 37 days with daily rainfall totals of < 1mm of rain.

It was also unusually dry in Palmerston North, Wellington, Wairarapa and throughout Otago, with monthly totals below a quarter of normal.

In contrast, February kicked off with a RED Severe Weather Warning issued for the West Coast. Heavy and sustained rainfall was forecast for Westland and Buller, with 750mm forecast about the Westland ranges over two days. Between 500mm and 1000mm of rain was observed along the Alps and West Coast. These Red Warnings are reserved for the most extreme and impactful weather events - and this was only the fifth Red Warning MetService has issued since the colour coded system was introduced in 2019.

“

A state of emergency was declared in the Buller District between 2 and 5 February

Significant flooding and multiple slips were indeed observed across the West Coast, with most roads closed, and several townships cut off. A state of emergency was declared in the Buller District between 2 and 5 February. Taranaki also experienced extreme flooding when the same weather system moved onto the lower North Island, and another Red Warning was issued there.

High humidity and the approach of Tropical Cyclone Dovi towards New Zealand sparked another suite of heavy rain warnings issued for the West Coast, as well as many North Island areas. Another state of emergency was declared in Buller on 9 February, with mandatory evacuations undertaken there, with concerns around flooding while the region remained soggy and impacted by the previous heavy rain.

“

High humidity and the approach of Tropical Cyclone Dovi towards New Zealand sparked another suite of heavy rain warnings issued for the West Coast, as well as many North Island areas

Tropical Cyclone Dovi then brought severe gales and heavy rainfall to many parts of the North Island on 12-13 February, making landfall just north of Taranaki with a central pressure near 986 hPa (hectoPascals) (Fig. 2).

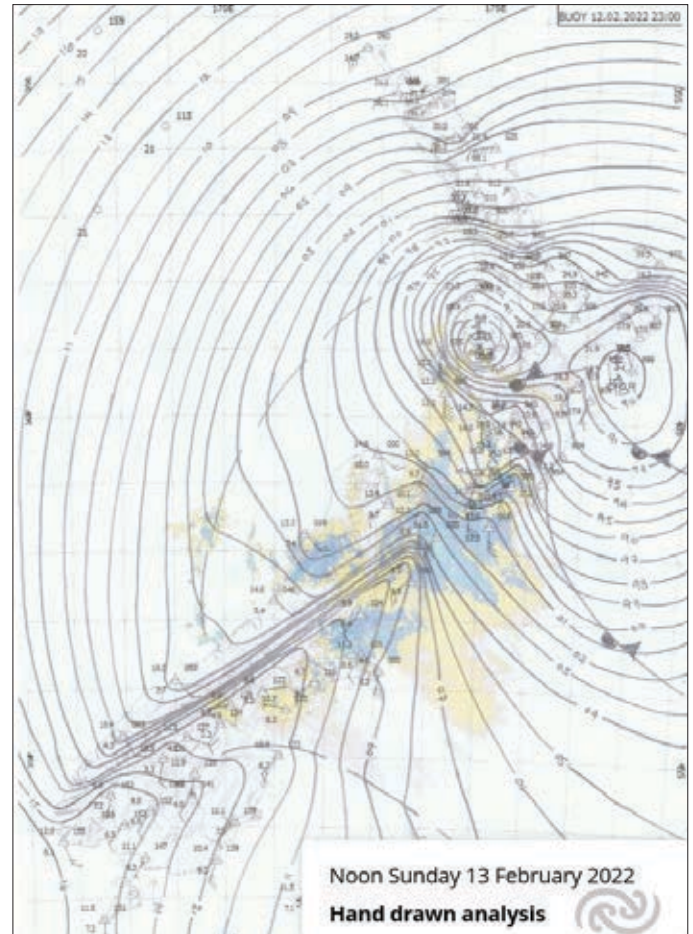


Figure 2: MetService forecasters analyse weather maps by hand, in order to understand the current state of the atmosphere, and to carefully examine weather features (fronts, troughs, lows, Highs etc) over New Zealand. This analysis enables the forecast team to assess which weather models are initialising well, and ensures that MetService selects a weather forecast model that is most likely to accurately predict up-coming weather conditions

Damaging winds were experienced across Northland and Auckland, as well as around central New Zealand (especially Taranaki and Wellington).

Stations in Taupo and Masterton broke their all-time wettest day records, associated with intense rainfall in the lead-up to TC Dovi, while stations in Taumarunui and Wellington broke their February wettest day records.

Looking ahead, many growers and farmers would like to see a more 'normal' run of weather for autumn. ●

As always, you can ask the long-range team at MetService for a seasonal forecast, or you can keep up to date with the MetService long-range forecast at: <http://metservice.com/rural/monthly-outlook>



DEALING WITH SOIL COMPACTION ISSUES



opinion



Robin Boom : CPAg, Member of the Institute of Professional Soil Scientists

Almost all terrestrial life is dependent on the top few inches of topsoil. Yet worldwide, this precious resource is being decimated by poor management and abuse, resulting in an average loss of 13.5 tonnes per hectare each year.

Instead of nourishing crops, fertile topsoil is ending up in drains, ditches, rivers, lakes and the ocean. The production of more than 95% of the food we eat relies on soil, which is a mix of rock particles, decaying organic matter, roots, fungi and other micro-organisms.

Soil compaction is one of the major causes of soil degradation and loss.

Compacted soils restrict crop production and increase nutrient leaching and greenhouse gas emissions. It is a longstanding phenomenon around the globe and is not only associated with agriculture, but also with forestry harvesting, amenity land use and land reformation for urban development. In agriculture, the principal causes are when compressive forces from wheels, tillage machinery, harvesting machinery and trampling from livestock, act on compressible soil.

“

The production of more than 95% of the food we eat relies on soil, which is a mix of rock particles, decaying organic matter, roots, fungi and other micro-organisms

Back in the days when the mould-board plough was the main implement used for cultivation, a compacted layer would often develop just below the share depth, known as the plough pan. Tillage implements smear and compact the soil immediately below their operating depth and pans from these are most notable in medium to fine textured soils. The soil can become so hard, roots struggle to penetrate through and will often be shallow, growing out sideways above the compacted layer.

Compacted soils can become impervious to water and air infiltration, resulting in ponding of water on flat surfaces in big rainfall events. In soils which are waterlogged for long periods due to the inability of water to permeate through them, plants and macro-invertebrates drown due to the lack of oxygen and soil respiration.

Deep ripping can help break up these compacted layers, but the heavy machinery required to pull rippers through the soil can also add to the problem. Using giant discs or chisel ploughs can help prevent a compacted layer building up in the soil, but with all implements, a tractor with enough horsepower to pull them sometimes compounds the issue. Each time the soil is inverted or tilled, the soil structure is broken down. Trying to achieve a nice fine seed bed can be good for certain crops short-term, but long-term the lack of soil structure and porosity reduces the soil's productive capacity and future suitability to grow crops.

Many arable farmers and growers are happy to apply high rates of artificial fertilisers to ensure a good crop, but they are often neglectful of that important element, oxygen, and its benefits for proper soil function. The worst problems tend to occur when root crops and vegetables are harvested from soils at field capacity, or wetter than field capacity, so timing can be an important mitigating tool. The weather of course does not fit in with our schedules and agendas, but keeping an eye on future forecasts and using heavy machinery when soils are dry enough so as not to cause too much damage is an important factor in reducing compaction.

Incorporating minimum tillage, strip tillage or zero tillage crop planting techniques will also help maintain better soil structure with less topsoil loss. Cultivating the soil results in the loss of organic matter as soil micro-organisms utilise soil carbon for themselves, ultimately resulting in the loss of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, depleting soil carbon reserves. Carbon helps to hold soil particles together, reducing the risk of soil losses from wind and erosion and helping to maintain soil porosity and moisture retention. Minimum tillage techniques help maintain soil carbon and organic matter and are much kinder on soil organisms.

Earthworms and other soil biology are important for aeration and the rebuilding of topsoil. Many broad-spectrum pesticides and fungicides are not conducive to promoting soil biology, so using chemicals which are more soil friendly can help build up the numbers of biological organisms. Soil can be created over time as dead things are broken down and contribute energy and nutrients to an ecosystem based on the underlying rock, but this rebuilding process is very slow and on average, topsoil erodes 10 to 30 times faster than it is produced. Adding carbon to the soil in the form of composts, animal manures and biochar can help restore a healthy soil.

One technique claimed to reduce compaction with heavy machinery is to reduce the tyre pressure on machinery, or have multiple axles or extra tyres on wheel axles to provide a greater surface area to carry the weight of the tractor or wheeled implement being towed. Vehicle loads of 10 tonnes can result in subsurface compaction down to 0.5 metres. Having less vehicular traffic driving over a field by doing a number of tasks in a single pass such as tilling, sowing and fertilising will also help reduce compaction.

Topsoil compaction on sloping landscapes enhances run-off and can accelerate erosion, particularly along wheel tracks and plough furrows. Cultivating along the contour on sloping ground rather than downhill can lessen scouring and topsoil loss.

“
The worst problems tend to occur when root crops and vegetables are harvested from soils at field capacity, or wetter than field capacity, so timing can be an important mitigating tool

The use of gypsum (calcium sulphate) and lime (calcium carbonate) can help mitigate soil compaction too, as the calcium helps in the flocculation of clay particles – increasing soil porosity and permeability.

Magnesium can have the opposite effect. Soils high in magnesium are often very heavy and plasticine like, therefore increasing the calcium to magnesium ratio in the base saturation percentage figures can help the soil loosen up.

Excess sodium can likewise cause the soil to become hard and compacted. Both lime and gypsum can address and reduce high sodium loadings in the soil. There is, however, a danger of over-liming which can affect the availability of some essential micronutrients; so make sure pH (acidity/alkalinity) levels are in the optimum range for the crop grown and not excessive.

Similarly for some fodder crops, excess sulphur can be detrimental to livestock, so high rates of gypsum could trigger animal health problems from grazing animals. Soil tests are useful in ascertaining what will be the best calcium product to use when soil compaction is a problem.

“
Soil can be created over time as dead things are broken down and contribute energy and nutrients to an ecosystem based on the underlying rock, but this rebuilding process is very slow

The old saying ‘prevention is better than cure’ stands when it comes to soil compaction. Using best management practices to circumvent potential damage and soil losses is the key to long term sustainability and profitability off an ever-decreasing pool of arable land upon which humans depend. ●

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47 POTATO PROGRAMMES





SUSTAINING OUR INDUSTRY IN THE YEAR AHEAD

Gemma Carroll : Potatoes NZ Inc. communications and extension officer



Sheffield harvest

The New Zealand Potato Industry continues to provide high quality, staple food for domestic and export markets and supporting that, the team at PNZ are finalising our plan for the year ahead, based on a sustainability strategy and a new framework for research and extension.

PNZ's sustainability focus

Globally and domestically consumer demands fuel the pace of change that we are faced with, including regulation. We are seeing a push from consumers to know the provenance of their food, for growers to show transparency in production methods, in farming methods, in environmental impacts and for industry social good. Though challenging, this is an exciting time for our industry. We already have high quality standards and low environmental impacts, compared to many other staple foods and vegetables.

Being explicit about our strengths as an industry could mean greater market opportunities for growers. This allows us to succeed in the face of changing consumer expectations.

There are two major sustainability programmes underway which PNZ is very proud of

As an industry we need to be thinking more critically and collaboratively about pests, disease and environmental management.

The *Sustainable Vegetable Systems Project* addresses inaccuracies in previous nitrate leaching models for vegetable crops. It is hoped the outcomes from this \$7.5 million dollar project, co-funded by the Ministry for Primary Industries, will be measurable positive impacts on both the environment (water quality and emissions) and for business bottom lines. Overall, PNZ hopes to see more sustainable economic and environmental outcomes for growers.



CEO Chris Claridge

The Canterbury Potato Liberibacter Initiative is a grower and processor, special-levy-funded, multi-project programme, addressing the ongoing challenge of psyllid and liberibacter damage to plants and tubers, especially in the processing sector. Although Canterbury based, the project findings will eventually be shared with the whole industry, as psyllid populations can affect any of our growing regions. It is another example of just how collaborative potato businesses can be, and with team effort so much can be achieved. Overall, this initiative addresses sustainable quality through pest and disease management.

PNZ is also watching and exploring the new directions in regenerative agriculture, partnering with iwi and incorporating mātauranga Māori in our research projects. Our industry can build capability and leadership, social sustainability and support unique opportunities in Māori agribusiness, whilst establishing a connected, diverse approach to potato production and food systems.

The revised PNZ strategy and annual business plan will be shared with industry in April this year.

We are also encouraging growers to start thinking about how to adapt farm and production systems to capitalise on consumer trends, in areas such as decarbonisation and emissions reductions. We look forward to sharing a local grower story on this journey in 2022.



Phrases such as adjusting to the new normal are no longer helpful, because the 'new normal' is ever changing. What we need to do is become comfortable with uncertainty, know our limits and know when to tap out for a rest

The silver lining in the pandemic for PNZ has been a chance to prioritise our activities, based on economic,

POTATO OF THE MONTH: LILY ROSE

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PNZ Vision Statement

environmental and social pillars of sustainability, informed by grower insights, technical advisory panels and strong governance.

PNZ chief executive Chris Claridge encourages the team and industry to keep putting one foot in front of the other, to “stay focused on our prioritised goals, not be distracted by the ‘white noise’ around us and take time out as needed.” The overarching vision for Potatoes NZ is a secure and sustainable future for our industry. This includes **sustainable teamwork during crises.**

The pandemic, on top of regulatory changes and climate adaptation feel like a pressure cooker but have also demonstrated what we can do at capacity; however, there are limits to enduring emergencies and crises.

Phrases such as adjusting to the new normal are no longer helpful, because the ‘new normal’ is ever changing. What we need to do is become comfortable with uncertainty, know our limits and know when to tap out for a rest.

PNZ encourages growers, their families and staff to support each other in sharing their stress levels and allowing time out as needed.

An example of how we do this in the PNZ team, is that we allow 5-10 minutes at the start of any meeting that we run for each attendee to rate their stress on a 1-10 scale and disclose any story around that stress, if they want to. It is becoming easier with repeated practice and can even be funny and light-hearted at times. Disclosing our stressors builds trust and resilience in the team. ●

We encourage growers to reach out to us for support anytime on our **0800 399 674** line.

We also encourage growers to check our Covid-19 page for advice, including the farm template for planning during the pandemic, links to employer support and the Critical Workers Register which enables close contacts to continue to work <https://potatoesnz.co.nz/news-info/covid-19/>

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PASSING THE BATON

Helen Barnes : TomatoesNZ Inc. general manager

I am pleased to advise that Rebecca Fisher has been appointed as TomatoesNZ interim general manager, to take over from me.

Rebecca was executive manager of Citrus New Zealand for six years and crop protection manager for Market Access Solutionz for 11 years, working in regulatory affairs. She has worked with tomato growers in the Market Access Solutionz role.

Rebecca now works at HortNZ and is looking forward to working closely with the TomatoesNZ Board and growers to help achieve their goals and priorities, as well as overcome some of the obstacles growers face at this challenging time.

We are delighted to welcome Rebecca to TomatoesNZ!

Rebecca can be contacted at Rebecca.Fisher@hortnz.co.nz

Tribute to Helen

As chair of Tomatoes NZ, Helen is one of those treasures we see from time to time in organisations; being a person that is connected, passionate, knowledgeable, as well as being a great person to work with.

Helen has been fully committed in delivering results for tomato growing and growers in NZ. I especially acknowledge her efforts and commitment to biosecurity preparedness and responses for the industry. But her efforts have gone much wider, including work programmes to find biological solutions to current pest issues, to look for viable solutions to support decarbonisation of the industry, seeking automation solutions to labour, and to promote New Zealand's great tomatoes to consumers.

The board realised after the long stint she has done in HortNZ as well as in Tomatoes NZ that Helen moving onto greener pastures was inevitable. Nevertheless, we wish her all the very best in her new role at GNS.

- Barry O'Neil, Tomatoes NZ chair



Emiliano Veronesi

Biocontrol agent *Engytatus* study completed

Over the past three years, Emiliano Veronesi has undertaken PhD research, sponsored by TomatoesNZ, into using the mirid bug *Engytatus nicotianae* to manage the tomato-potato psyllid (TPP) in greenhouse tomato crops.

We would like to congratulate Emiliano for submitting his thesis to Lincoln University!

His PhD has demonstrated that *Engytatus* has enormous potential as a biocontrol agent for TPP. Work on how to implement *Engytatus* in a commercial tomato glasshouse Integrated Pest Management setting is now underway under the *A Lighter Touch* research programme.

Read the Q&A with Emiliano below to find out more about him and his work on behalf of tomato growers.

1 Where are you from originally and what brought you to New Zealand?

I'm Italian, from a small town called Lodi, about 25 km south of Milan. I used to be a tutor and a science teacher in Italy, but then I decided I wanted to DO science, not just teach it, so I applied for several PhD positions and I was selected for a few of them. Among the options, a PhD funded by TomatoesNZ looked great to me, as my entire career (in terms of studying) has been focussed on the environment, agriculture and entomology, so this project on TPP was just perfect!

2 What made you choose *Engytatus* as a focus for your PhD?

It all started with me filling a whiteboard with candidates for biocontrol agents that were already present (hence legal) in New Zealand. Our aim was to identify something new and with potential, which helped a lot with the screening process, as most of the beneficial insects we listed had already been evaluated before and they weren't very successful.

We ended up having a handful of candidates and almost no clue on which one we should start researching. In the end, we decided to factor in the ability of bugs to survive for a little while in the absence of prey, and whether there were records (from overseas) of good results from relative species. This narrowed down our choice to a couple of candidates. *Engytatus* was our choice, based also on the availability of the bug which Bioforce could supply.

3 Were you surprised by anything in your research?

The entire process of research is a constant surprise but yes, we were surprised definitely by our results, especially with regards to the first cage trial of *Engytatus* against TPP.

Actually, surprised is not even the right word, we were sceptical, to such an extent that we decided to run the same experiment twice. Because the results were so promising, we believed some unknown external factor might have played a role. Luckily enough, we had even better results with the second run, which was definitely a (good) surprise: it doesn't happen very often to come across such potential when you research biocontrol agents.

4 What have some of the challenges been over the past couple of years?

Researching is challenging if we consider that you are dedicating time and money to evaluating whether something works or not, and most of time it doesn't. But this is part of the game and everyone who signs up to be a researcher should learn how to deal with that.

However, there are things that have happened that I wasn't prepared for. One of them was Covid-19: it has disrupted a good portion of my work and even caused the loss of three months of experimental work, as we weren't allowed to access our greenhouse during lockdown. Furthermore, Covid has kept me far from my family and friends, whom I haven't seen since September 2019.

However, the biggest challenge for me has been the loss of my mentor and supervisor, Professor Steve Wratten, almost a year ago. I had such a good relationship with him and he was so helpful and supportive that for a little while, I felt like everything was lost. It was the desire to keep his view (and our project) alive that gave me the strength to carry on. Thankfully, Professor Stephen Goldson, my new supervisor, has also been very supportive and because of his help, I've managed to conclude my experiments and to write and submit my thesis.

5 What are you most proud about with your publication?

Nowadays it feels like there is some sort of battle going on between those who want to see chemicals banned and those who think that biocontrol is useless. Funnily enough, both views are wrong.

Today, it would be impossible to maintain our standards of productivity without the aid of pesticides. However, it is rather naïve (to say the least), to think that biocontrol cannot play an important role in the management of pests.

At the end of the day, that's what Integrated Pest Management (IPM) really is: a combination of different approaches to cope with pests. This is the premise behind my work, so to answer your question: I'm proud to have been working in this area, making some small contribution to the pursuit of more sustainable agriculture.

6 Where to next?

I do love teaching as much as I love researching. My dream is to be a lecturer: such a role would allow me to teach the next generations of farmers and scientists, and in the meantime, keep doing research.

Emiliano's current paper can be read online. If you would like an email to the link, please email Dinah Dinah.cohen@hortnz.co.nz

Elly's energy efficiency e-book available

You may have been following the articles that have been appearing in the NZGrower magazine over the last 18 months or so by greenhouse specialist, Elly Nederhoff. This series explored data and the experiences of the covered crop industry in the Netherlands, and is now available as a handy e-book.

You can check out all of Elly's articles and the e-book on the TomatoesNZ website "Energy" page under the "hot topics" tab here as well as downloading her e-book.

Decarbonisation funding for greenhouses

Last month we told you about funding that is available from our partners at the Energy Efficiency and Conservation Authority (EECA), specifically aimed at small to medium sized grower. They can provide co-funding for projects that will reduce carbon emissions from your greenhouse. ●

More details about what is on offer are available here: <https://www.eeca.govt.nz/co-funding/technology-demonstration/>

If your business would like one-to-one advice on what might best for you, please email Dinah.cohen@hortnz.co.nz

Applications close 25 March 2022.



TOO LITTLE, TOO LATE

Richard Palmer : Process Vegetables New Zealand general manager

The year 2022 has brought the inevitable Covid-19 Omicron wave, a risk well signalled to growers and post-harvest processors but not it would seem, to the Ministry of Health or the government.

Those we have trusted to lead us through Covid seem slow to react and decidedly lacklustre in their planning, with rules being dribbled out in a slow and confused manner, often also being incomprehensible or contradictory. Writing from Canberra, where the Omicron wave struck in early January, the actions for New Zealand seemed pretty obvious but the message from the New Zealand government was ‘we’re taking the time to plan.’

You’ll be wondering quite what that preparation was, as we’ve all been left dealing with last-minute decisions and constant changes, just as Omicron hits our businesses during the busy harvest season. I’ve spoken to lots of growers in recent weeks, all with the same concerns – what is the plan? And their answer is: we’ve got to get on, so we’ve made our own plans.

The dire labour shortage, further compounded by delays in Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme workers heading to New Zealand due to Covid-19 outbreaks and the Tongan tsunami, has everyone understaffed and on edge, all with the same question, how will I harvest and process my crop? Add in a complete government policy vacuum around critical workers and testing for return to work, and everyone knows the situation won’t improve in the short-term.

Our Minister, the Minister FOR Primary Industries, has allocated \$400,000 to enable rural support agencies to assist with contingency planning. Unfortunately, we are past the point of contingency planning because we’re harvesting. With Omicron upon us, growers acted quickly and decisively to develop their own rules and contingencies, while the Ministry of Health was still dwelling on the idea of ordering Rapid Antigen Tests,

critical worker processes, and devising complex rules. Sadly for some sectors, the additional failure to get regional areas highly vaccinated will now hamper critical businesses whose staff will have to isolate as close contacts (often up to 60 percent of workforces here in Australia).

With the severe labour shortage, many growers are considering which crops to leave behind. While this may relieve some pressure on harvest staff, it isn’t any less stressful for the business owners, managers and staff who have worked hard through this past growing season to produce a crop. Whether it’s seeing your hard work go to waste, or counting the lost revenue, it’s a bitter pill to swallow and only adds to the anxiety.



Despite the best efforts to attract and retain more Kiwis in permanent work, and the great work done to get RSE workers into New Zealand, we’re well short and Omicron will further reduce capacity

Where does that leave us in future? The answer from government is apparently automation – but despite over 15 years of investment in robot-ready orchard structures, I’m yet to see a machine that can accurately count fruit on trees, let alone harvest it. And how many growers could afford the \$1 or \$2 million?

The capital required for post-harvest is still well beyond the reach of most sectors. Put simply, despite the best efforts to attract and retain more Kiwis in permanent work, and the great work done to get RSE workers into New Zealand, we’re well short and Omicron will further reduce capacity.

With lost revenue from a short harvest, the ability for growers to absorb further costs has disappeared.

Yet those costs continue to increase: export shipping has doubled in price, and the return from markets is uncertain. Here at home in New Zealand, wages are rising – and rising fast – come 1 April 2022, wages in the horticulture sector will have risen by around 30% in two and a half years. Energy prices are rising leading to increased coolstorage, transport and processing costs.

“
Here at home in New Zealand, wages are rising – and rising fast – come 1 April 2022, wages in the horticulture sector will have risen by around 30% in two and a half years

But that’s only the direct costs. Still to come are further wage rises from the new unemployment tax; whatever extra costs come from a centralised wage bargaining model – the 1950s era Industry Award Scheme; government expecting growers to pay more and more for biosecurity responses; and who knows how much the irrigation, that you’ve funded through rates and sometimes shareholdings, will cost once *Three Waters* nationalises your regional water.

Add ongoing compliance costs and the reality is there’s little for investing in new varieties and growing systems to deal with climate change and environmental issues – issues we know need action for long-term feasibility.

So what?

Seasonal survival is the necessity for growers, still underpinned by hope that the government could approach policy and change sensibly. That hope is fading rapidly as government ill-preparedness and confusion attempts to lead us through the Omicron wave.

Bureaucrats and politicians in Wellington seem oblivious to the tenuous nature, not just of the economy, but of the followership that has been New Zealand’s pandemic hallmark. A swift reimaging of near-term New Zealand, with an attendant revision of political agendas, is necessary to preserve and rebuild the economic fortunes of the nation.

To play our role in the New Zealand economic recovery, the government sees horticulture export revenues of \$11 billion in 2030. That will require confidence to invest **today** in capital in planting and post-harvest processing and marketing, not sometime nearer 2030.

With few exceptions, confidence is precarious. We have a highly motivated, skilled and innovative sector, one that is willing to stake capital by understanding and accepting the risks. The greatest risk is the government overwhelming the horticulture sector with change and substantial additional costs, which will stifle productivity and growth, and erase export opportunities for us as a sector and for New Zealand.

“
To play our role in the New Zealand economic recovery, the government sees horticulture export revenues of \$11 billion in 2030

The hope of export gains and innovation that came when this government signed the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) free trade agreement is being hobbled by ideology; a poor understanding of fundamental economics and the primary sector; and exceptionally poor timing as the country and sector deal with Covid-19. ●

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TECHNOLOGY IS KEY TO UNLOCKING OUR FUTURE

Antony Heywood : Vegetables New Zealand Inc. general manager



A bespoke auto infeed to empty full produce crates onto a packing line

Technology will play a key part in a suite of resources growers will need to adopt if their businesses are to have longevity.

Photo 1 (left) shows how technology can replace labour in a packhouse. The grower decided that having five people empty crates onto an infeed system for a grading machine was inefficient so they developed a rotating drum to perform that function. Moreover, in a year like this year, the grower did not have the staff to do the task in any case.

Many growers are looking to technology to mitigate risk.

But how do growers access technology if they do not have the balance sheet to capitalise on technological advancements? This is the question we have put to the government.



A hot water buffer tank system with precise controllers and insulated pipework to optimise heat efficiency by more than 25%

Developing a highly productive and technically advanced labour force needs investment, whether it be government or grower sourced, or government incentivised. Clear signals from the government will empower growers and our industry to meet workforce and production challenges head on.

Technology is also key for covered crop growers who will need to decarbonise their process heat systems if they are to meet the requirements of the Climate Change Response Act. Under the provisions of this Act, covered crops will need to be carbon zero by 2050.

With the support of the Energy Efficiency and Conservation Authority (EECA), VNZI and TomatoesNZ (TNZ) have undertaken a technology scan of international best practice in covered crop growing. The full report can be found here: <https://www.freshvegetables.co.nz/grower-resources/>

**TECHNOLOGY WILL DELIVER
LABOUR EFFICIENCIES**

**TECHNOLOGY WILL DRIVE
A MORE TECHNICALLY
ADVANCED LABOUR FORCE**

**TECHNOLOGY WILL KEEP OUR BUSINESS AT
THE LEADING EDGE OF BEST PRACTICE**



The current thinking looks to:

- 1 Expand the technology section on the VNZI website to provide more resources to increase understanding of the new technologies that are coming onto the market.
- 2 Develop technology scans of international markets.
- 3 Partner more closely with Ausveg to see what is developing in Australia.
- 4 When appropriate - grower tours of international horticulture technology conferences and visits to leading international research and development institutions.

Before any energy heating solution is proposed or funded, it is vital that growers optimise their current glasshouse heating efficiency. This will enable the heating solution to be right sized for the operation. Many New Zealand growers have undergone an energy survey to look at installing screen technology and hot water buffer tanks, to optimise the size of their heating output.

VNZI is working with a number of stakeholders to ensure technology can be delivered to growers in a timely manner. An action plan is currently in development to explore technology more closely.

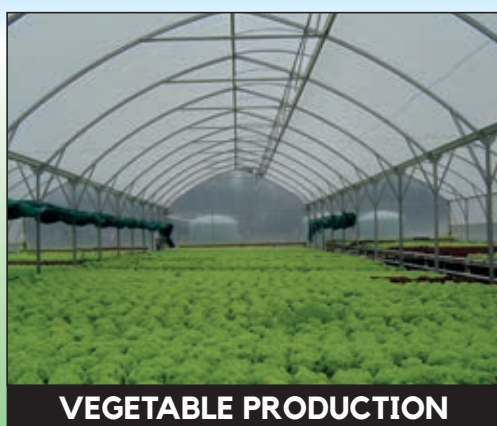
All growers need now is time, knowledge and capital to make it happen. Given the current labour shortage and operating environment, this could be a long bow to draw for some growers. However, VNZI is happy to start the process now. ●

Please contact antony.heywood@hortnz.co.nz for more information.



Greenhouses

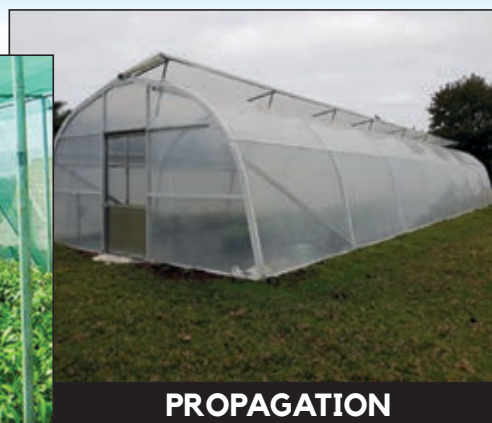
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THE NOT-SO-HUMBLE SUPER ONION

James Kuperus : Onions NZ Inc. chief executive

As part of the Sustainable Food and Fibre Futures (SFFF) and Onions NZ *Humble to Hero* project, Onions NZ is looking into the phytochemical profile of our homegrown onion.

The main goal of the *Humble to Hero* project is to position the industry more competitively in the global market. With health trends around food increasing, undoubtedly accelerated by Covid-19, we need to explore new ways to market and sell our onions.

Here are some findings from the research project that got underway early this year.

Phytochemicals

What are phytochemicals and why do we care? Phytochemicals are naturally occurring compounds in fruit, vegetable and food products that have proven under some conditions to act as antioxidants, protecting our bodies from cell damage. Chances are, if you're actively choosing to consume foods with beta carotene (vitamin A), antioxidants, anthocyanins or flavonoids, then you trust in the potential health benefits of phytochemicals.

“

With health trends around food increasing, undoubtedly accelerated by Covid-19, we need to explore new ways to market and sell our onions

Factors affecting health benefits

Understanding what can affect the phytochemicals is needed to support health claims.

Environmental factors will affect how the plant grows and uptakes from the soil. Similarly, varietal differences can result in different chemical processes occurring.

Further, the way the onion is cut and cooked will lead to different degrees of leaching. So far, it's understood that boiling as a cooking method removes most water-soluble phytochemicals, while frying retains the most.

“

New Zealand brown onions are higher in total sugars, vitamin C, and niacin or vitamin B3 compared to competitive products from the United Kingdom, Australia, Vietnam, the United States and India

The NZ onion vs other onions of the world

So where does the New Zealand onion sit compared to other onions of the world? According to the literature, New Zealand brown onions are higher in total sugars, vitamin C, and niacin or vitamin B3 compared to competitive products from the United Kingdom, Australia, Vietnam, the United States and India. Red onions however, although they appear to lead in total sugars, fall behind on vitamin C content compared to North American and Japanese onions.

Future

Besides focusing on health benefits, there are different ways the future onion can be marketed. Growing methods may be a marketing factor, promoting low residue, or organically grown onions, could appeal to the environmentally conscious global consumer.

Additionally, new onion varieties might spark interest and prompt new and novel ways to consume onions. Pink onions are making waves in Europe and the United Kingdom due to their unusual blush. Similarly, tearless onions, or onions that have a low lachrymatory factor, might appeal to the home cook. North America has also seen the rise in popularity of a sweet onion with a mild flavour. ●



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"We love helping lettuce growers to be profitable with the best varieties" says Herman van der Gulik, Sales Manager, Enza Zaden New Zealand.

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Berruguete NEW! Trial in autumn with best results in spring, med-large head and frame, cold tolerant, versatile, uniform and high cut out, strong against big vein.
Bl:16-37 / Nr:0

AUTUMN – WINTER ICEBERG:

Pedrola, autumn standard, reliable, adaptable, produces medium sized heads with high pack out in changeable weather.
Bl:16-27,29,32,34,36 / Nr:0

Diegola, robust, adaptable winter variety, large frame and good wrap for head protection, uniform round heads. Bl:16-27,29,32,34,36

Icemaker, a large iceberg with high leaf count with good big vein tolerance, sure heading with good uniformity. Early winter and spring harvest. Bl:16-36

Botiola (Icebreaker), winter standard, reliable, large size heads, firm heads with good volume, even under adverse conditions.
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Pelayo, a strong performer in the cool early spring conditions, large size, sure heading, suitable for cooler climates in New Zealand. Bl:16-36

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Wildebeast, standard very high yielding mid-dark green incised coral, serrated spiky leaves with rounded tip, fine leaf attachment with crisp texture, use for year round production, has an especially high winter production level. Pair with Rhone. Bl:16-36 / Nr: 0 (IR: LMV 1)

Skilton, high yielding dark green incised coral, serrated spiky leaves, small cut surface with fine leaf attachment to keep leaves fresh for longer. Crisp texture with excellent taste. Year round production, Very upright plant habit for reduced disease. Bl:16-36 / Nr:0 (IR:LMV1)

Rhone, high yielding deep red incised coral type, spiky serrated leaves, fresh green highlights, fine attachment, pair with Wildebeast. Bl:16-33 / Nr: 0

Ezflor, triple red, large high yielding dark red coral with incised leaf, with good 3D shaped leaf with strong green red contrast for maximum freshness, small cut surface for long shelf life, excellent mouth feel and taste. Bl:16-37 / Nr:0 / TBSV (IR: Fol: 1)

