



GROWER  
SUCCESS  
STORIES

REAL RESULTS FROM THE VEGETABLE R&D LEVY

## LIST OF LEVY-FUNDED PROJECTS IN THE HORT INNOVATION VEGETABLE FUND CONTRACTED IN 2017/18

CODE	TITLE	SERVICE PROVIDER
VG15068	Improving safety of vegetable produce through on-farm sanitation, using electrolysed oxidising (EO) water	University of South Australia
VG16031	VegPRO sub-project: AusChem chemical accreditation level 3	Train Safe NT
VG16031	VegPRO sub-project: VegInnovations 2018 regional roadshow	MacTavish West
VG16031	VegPRO sub-project: Chemical handling for vegetable crops	Duff Consulting
VG16031	VegPRO sub-project: Basic irrigation skills workshops	Applied Horticultural Research
VG16037	Novel topical vegetable, cotton virus and whitefly protection	The University of Queensland
VG16042	Pathogen persistence from paddock to plate	Fresh Produce Safety Centre Limited
VG16062	Field and landscape management to support beneficial arthropods for IPM on vegetable farms	Charles Sturt University
VG16064	Tools and interventions for increasing children's vegetable knowledge	CSIRO
VG16068	Optimising cover cropping for the Australian vegetable industry	Applied Horticultural Research
VG16071	Boosting vegetable consumption through diet	SP Health Co
VG16075	Monitoring and evaluation of vegetable consumer data projects	Clear Horizon Consulting
VG16078	Soil wealth and integrated crop protection - phase 2	Applied Horticultural Research
VG16080	Vegetable digital asset redevelopment - Veggycation®	Hardhat
VG16081	Vegetable market price reporting pilot program - market data	Ausmarkets Consultants
VG16084	Vegetable market price reporting pilot program - reporting	Freshlogic Pty Ltd
VG16085	Export facilitators	vegetablesWA
VG16086	Area wide management of vegetable diseases: viruses and bacteria	Queensland Department of Agriculture and Fisheries
VG17000	Vegetable business benchmarking	vegetablesWA; RM Consulting Group
VG17003	National Vegetable Protected Cropping Centre	University of Western Sydney
VG17004	Vegetable knowledge transfer at the 2018 International Spinach Conference	EGVID
VG17006	Strategic review of the Australian vegetable industry's extension and training programs	Key-Link Solutions
VG17013	Building the business case to grow domestic demand for vegetables in Australia	McKINNA et al
VG17014	Review of issues and options for preventing and removing redback spiders in broccoli	Applied Horticultural Research
MT17010	World of Perishables, Dubai - Taste Australia attendance	Pico Australia
MT17012	Generation of residue data for permit applications	Peracto; Eurofins
MT17017	Vegetable cluster consumer insights program	The Nielsen Company
MT17022	10th Australasian Soilborne Disease Symposium sponsorship	Plevin and Associates
PH16000	Stingless bees as effective managed pollinators for Australian horticulture	University of Western Sydney
ST17000	Generation of data for pesticide applications in horticulture crops 2018	Peracto; Eurofins



## INTRODUCTION

### NATIONAL VEGETABLE LEVY

The growers profiled in this publication have benefited from their involvement or engagement with Hort Innovation Vegetable Fund levy investments, by taking the outcomes of levy-funded research and development projects and applying them on their farms to generate success for their business.

#### WHAT IS THE LEVY?

Levies are collected by the government from vegetable growers to support research and development projects that are designed to increase the productivity, profitability and competitiveness of the industry. The levy rate as of 1 October 2018 is 0.51 per cent of the value of the first point of sale, with:

- 0.485 per cent dedicated to research and development projects;
- 0.015 per cent dedicated to biosecurity; and
- 0.01 per cent dedicated to the Emergency Plant Pest Response (EPPR) Levy to pay industry's share of costs to the tomato-potato psyllid biosecurity response and a 12-month Transition to Management program.

#### WHO MANAGES THE RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT LEVY?

Research and development levies are managed by Research and Development Corporations, which for the Australian horticulture industry is Hort Innovation. The biosecurity and EPPR Levies are administered by Plant Health Australia.

#### HOW IS THE LEVY INVESTED?

Hort Innovation invests research and development levy funds with advice from Strategic Investment Advisory Panels (SIAPs), which are groups (primarily growers) that provide advice to Hort

Innovation about the best ways to invest these funds to increase the productivity, profitability and competitiveness of the industry. These panels are guided by the Strategic Investment Plan (SIP) for their industry, which provides insight into how best to invest these levy funds to ensure the highest return on investment for growers according to the desired outcomes.

Ideas for research projects, or 'concepts', can be made by anyone in the industry, including growers. The process for submitting a concept is straightforward and quick. A concept for a research project can be made online via the Hort Innovation Concept Portal (visit [edms.horticulture.com.au/Forms/ConceptFormV2](https://edms.horticulture.com.au/Forms/ConceptFormV2)), or by contacting the Hort Innovation Relationship Managers for the vegetable industry, Jane Wightman, on 0427 142 046 or at [jane.wightman@horticulture.com.au](mailto:jane.wightman@horticulture.com.au), or Sam Turner, on 0403 093 227 or at [sam.turner@horticulture.com.au](mailto:sam.turner@horticulture.com.au).

Once the SIAPs provide advice on the concepts that should progress to investment, Hort Innovation manages an open, competitive tender process to ensure that the service providers for its projects are cost-effective and of the highest quality to achieve the best return for growers.

Project tenders are then subject to a selection and advisory process, where a panel that may be made up of growers, relevant industry experts, Hort Innovation staff and SIAP members select the preferred provider for the project based on areas including cost-effectiveness, potential impact to industry and previous history of project delivery. Each successful provider must provide a detailed budget, and adhere to a strict reporting, monitoring and evaluation process so that projects are carefully managed to deliver ongoing benefits to growers.

Once these projects progress through the contracting process, the Federal Government also contributes funding to them, which means that growers receive an even greater return on their investment from levy funds.

#### VEGETABLE SIP

Levy investments for the vegetable industry are guided by the outcomes listed in the industry's SIP, which include:

- Increase demand and value of the domestic vegetable industry;
- Increase demand and value of vegetable industry exports;
- Increase farm productivity and decrease production costs;
- Increase supply chain integration; and
- Improve grower capabilities through communication, development and extension programs.

The potential impact of the SIP for the vegetable industry is \$472 million return on an estimated investment of \$91 million over the next five years. The SIP can be found on the Hort Innovation website at [horticulture.com.au/vegetable-fund](https://horticulture.com.au/vegetable-fund).

The list on page 2 has been taken from the *Hort Innovation Vegetable Fund Annual Report 2017/18*, and outlines all new projects from that financial period.

For a current look at all new, ongoing and recently completed projects, see the latest edition of Hortlink available from [horticulture.com.au/vegetable-fund](https://horticulture.com.au/vegetable-fund), and find project updates, news and other industry information in *Vegetables Australia*, the *AUSVEG Weekly Update*, any of our social media channels or on the AUSVEG website at [ausveg.com.au](https://ausveg.com.au).



Photography by Loic Le Gully.



Photography by Andrew Beveridge.

## JONO CRAVEN

### TURNING OVER A NEW LEAF

For Tasmanian vegetable grower Jono Craven, his overall experience of attending the 2018 International Spinach Conference in Murcia, Spain, encompassed far more than the sum of its parts.

From growing on flat ground and de-risking production in polytunnels to better understanding physiology, seed production costs and biosecurity issues, the Farming Manager at Houston's Farm in Cambridge wholeheartedly embraced all learnings from the eight-day tour in February as part of a 14-strong Australian contingent of researchers, agronomists and producers.

Through *Knowledge transfer at the 2018 International Spinach Conference* (VG17004), a strategic levy investment under the Hort Innovation Vegetable Fund that was facilitated by East Gippsland Vegetable Innovation Days, the insights Jono gained during the tour were even more productive considering that spinach breeding and seed production occurs primarily in the Netherlands, France and Denmark.

"I was able to gain a broad amount of knowledge from all sectors, from research to plant breeding to commercial growing, and then bring facets of all of those back to our business. It wasn't just one aspect, but a combination of the collective knowledge and experience gained on the tour that I'll remember most," Jono says.

"For us to be able to access the plant breeders on the other side of the world and talk to them about their issues – and our alignment with those – was invaluable, because we're largely geographically separated from them and they don't come to Australia much."

#### DISCUSSING GLOBAL CHALLENGES

Jono says the researchers and seed producers on the tour enjoyed discussing the topic of global plant breeding at the

two-day conference. The issue of downy mildew and its latest strain, race 17, zeroed in on an issue familiar to Australian producers, particularly organic producers who can't use fungicides.

Water quality (nutrients) and availability (drought) was another issue Spanish farmers were tackling, exacerbated in part by an overuse of fertilisers contaminating waterways with nitrogen.

"One of the things we saw in Spain was use of compost because they have low organic matter in their soils," Jono says.

"They also had very strict nutrient-use requirements, due to environmentally-sensitive areas around the coast. The government dictates that they are only able to use a fairly low amount of fertiliser, particularly nitrogen."

After the conference, visits to seed producers, plant breeders and commercial growers provided practical revelations involving crop protection methods and foreign-object control.

"We saw people producing and using similar varieties to us, and we saw some different techniques that aren't used in Australia," Jono says.

"We saw people using one-metre-high crop barriers around fields to protect from plastic, insects and animals infesting their crops."

Jono added that the large amount of plastic was a remnant of summer melon production where drip tape and plastic bed systems were not properly removed.

#### INTERNATIONAL LEARNINGS

Innovation also came into play in arid areas of Spain, with Jono and the other delegates witnessing a range of different growing practices.

"We saw one producer not using beds to grow so they were growing on flat ground, which is highly unusual and not really practiced in Australia because of

the climate and soils," Jono says.

"We also saw crop protection methods, such as people growing small areas of their crop in polytunnels, so they can de-risk their production."

A personal highlight for Jono was seeing the scale of production innovations by English producers growing in Spain for the European winter market.

"This included harvesting crop in bulk on a large scale, and then cheaply harvesting, decanting and being able to send the product for two or three days in a truck to packing facilities in Europe and England," he says.

Best of all, the new-found knowledge and industry contacts are already being put to good use at Houston's Farm, resulting in the introduction of new varieties to the range and future plans.

#### SUMMARY

- Project VG17004 allowed a contingent of 14 researchers, agronomists and producers, including Tasmanian vegetable grower Jono Craven, to visit commercial growers and seed trial sites in Spain. These visits provided access to cutting-edge research, plant breeding and growing techniques.
- The knowledge acquired at the International Spinach Conference also included academic research papers and presentations aimed at growers.
- *Knowledge transfer at the 2018 International Spinach Conference* has been funded by Hort Innovation using the vegetable research and development levy and contributions from the Australian Government.

## ANTHONY DE IESO

### THE PROFESSIONAL EDGE

Thorndon Park Produce bunch line grower Anthony De Ieso would like other vegetable growers to think of VegPRO as their own TAFE or university.

Anthony says VegPRO is a one-stop shop for your training needs – and everything is free.

Aiming to take training out of the classroom, the adaptive project provides producers, staff and other supply chain members with targeted training to meet specific needs.

So far, Anthony and his staff have taken advantage of training, such as VegInnovations – How to value add your product, chemical accreditation, soil-borne diseases and chemical certification courses. They even hosted an irrigation workshop at their Gawler River farm which grows spinach, kale, parsley, radish, beetroot, silverbeet and spring onions.

"...for me, the various workshops have been a great avenue to learn things that I wouldn't necessarily learn..."

"Traditionally there's not much upskilling involved in this industry with a learn-as-you-go approach to on-the-job training," Anthony says.

"But for me, the various workshops have been a great avenue to learn things that I wouldn't necessarily learn from, say, my father.

"For irrigation I would have been told, 'chuck the sprinklers on for 40 minutes on a really hot day. If the ground's wet, put them on for 20 minutes'. But after hosting an irrigation workshop, I was able to find out how I can look at saturation level and how much my watering has impacted my crops by digging a hole with a spade. That may sound trivial, but I didn't actually know that before.

"Learning things like that and then

seeing the improvement in my soil has been really great for the business, so now my staff and I do as many workshops as we can to keep our skill levels up to constantly learn."

*Vegetable industry education and training initiative* (VegPRO, VG15028) is a strategic levy investment under the Hort Innovation Vegetable Fund.

#### HOW TO GET INVOLVED

Anthony says it is easy to get involved with VegPRO – in many cases it's as simple as people reading the *Weekly Update* e-newsletter produced by AUSVEG, or getting in touch with your local VegNET representative.

"All you need to do is check your emails and see what events or courses are planned. If there's something that interests

#### REAL BENEFITS

Anthony says most of the courses are held over one day, which makes it easier for staff to attend.

"Generally speaking, I look at the course and make a judgement on a) Are we busy at the moment? Can I spare them? b) Will this course benefit them professionally? And c) Will this benefit the business? If I can tick two of the three boxes, I'll send them to the courses. That means in 90 per cent of the courses, I'll be sending someone along.

"Has it made my life easier? Yes. Has it made my staff more aware? Yes. And am I learning as well? Yes. If we can all take away a few points from every workshop, then it has been a success."

#### SUMMARY

- VegPRO (Project VG15028) has enabled vegetable levy-paying growers such as Anthony De Ieso and his Thorndon Park Produce staff in South Australia to undertake free training courses. Growers are also encouraged to provide feedback, suggest training ideas and utilise the resources available at [vegpro.com.au](http://vegpro.com.au).
- During the project, Anthony hosted an on-farm irrigation workshop which also allowed him to improve his growing practices. Now Anthony and his staff attend as many workshops as possible to learn skills which they can take back to the business.
- *Vegetable industry education and training initiative* is funded by Hort Innovation using the vegetable research and development levy and contributions from the Australian Government. It is coordinated by RM Consulting Group.

# STEPHANIE TABONE

## AN EMERGING INDUSTRY LEADER

Stephanie Tabone is never afraid of a challenge.

Upon completion of her Bachelor of Science in Agriculture at the University of Sydney, the 23-year-old uprooted herself from her family in Sydney in early 2017 to undertake a graduate program at Kalfresh in Kalbar, south-west of Brisbane, which has blossomed into a production management role.

Stephanie's partner initially accompanied her to help settle in, but he has since taken on a production role at Kalfresh and the couple recently purchased a home together. Being out of their comfort zone clearly suits the go-ahead growers.

Kalfresh began as a family business in 1992 and has since become a multi-million-dollar vegetable growing and packing enterprise. Stephanie's role encompasses management

backgrounds participated in the residential workshops. A key component of the program is the opportunity for participants to work in groups and develop strategies to achieve the cohort's chosen vision of 'producing clean and green vegetables for everyone, everywhere'. Stephanie says the program organisers brought a lot of energy to these discussions.

"You are challenged to step outside your comfort zone and be the best version of yourself. You are also given opportunities to develop and practice new skills and to share your strengths with your team," she says.

Stephanie's strategy group chose the topic of Championing Change, which aims to share the success stories of people in the industry to encourage cultural change in the sector. The topics discussed covered

with your workplace's values; having courage and decisiveness; and listening carefully because you learn something new from everybody.

Stephanie was unequivocal about the program exceeding her expectations and encouraged other young industry members to follow suit.

"It's a great way to build confidence in yourself to step up into leadership roles and the facilitators are incredibly encouraging in providing feedback for areas of improvement. The other participants would agree that we've forged strong connections with each other for future networking and friendships," she says.

Needless to say, the future looks bright for this rising industry star.

“It's a great way to build confidence in yourself to step up into leadership roles”

of product quality, safety and hygiene in Kalfresh's facilities; process and packing efficiency; achieving key performance indicators; and management and support of employees (a team of 20), while ensuring the crop is maximised and supplied on time and in full to customers.

Another feather in Stephanie's cap is her graduation in September 2018 from the six-month *Growing Leaders* program, a strategic levy investment under the Hort Innovation Vegetable Fund. Facilitated by leadership development company Affectus, this year's program provided the opportunity for emerging leaders in the Australian vegetable industry to develop their personal, business and industry skills during workshops in Melbourne, Brisbane and Canberra.

### LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE

Eighteen attendees from a range of growing, leadership and organisational

all aspects of the supply chain, emphasising that positive change is an industry-wide team effort, Stephanie says.

### INDUSTRY EXPOSURE

The program's workshops encompassed knowledge-sharing, developing leadership skills and creating a mission statement that was presented to industry members and at parliamentary meetings with Federal Minister for Agriculture and Water Resources David Littleproud, Senator Richard Colbeck and Victorian Independent MP Cathy McGowan.

Among the influential speakers who presented to the group was Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority CEO Dr Chris Parker.

"He gave us seven tips on what comprises a good leader and every single one of those resonated with me," Stephanie says.

They included developing a set of personal, ethical values that also align

### SUMMARY

- *Growing Leaders* (Project VGI5030) is a national vegetable industry leadership program which engages 18 emerging leaders in the Australian vegetable industry with a mix of theory, practical industry-based visits and discussion panels with industry experts and politicians, at three workshops over six months.
- Stephanie Tabone from Queensland participated in the 2018 *Growing Leaders* program, which allowed her to further develop her leadership skills. This professional development will assist in her production management role at vegetable growing operation Kalfresh, as well as her involvement in the wider vegetable industry.
- *Growing Leaders 2016-2018* has been funded by Hort Innovation using the vegetable research and development levy and contributions from the Australian Government.





## DEON GIBSON

### COVERED IN GLORY

Award-winning carrots are just one sign for Deon Gibson that patience has its own rewards when using cover cropping.

Inspired by 2015 Farmer of the Year Grant Sims, local Tasmanian grower Darren Long and various field days and walks, the Premium Fresh Tasmania Farm Manager started to revive cover cropping on his property. Deon is now working with others from Queensland and Victoria on a three-year project with Applied Horticultural Research Scientist Dr Kelvin Montagu entitled *Optimising cover cropping for the Australian vegetable industry* (VG16068), a strategic levy investment under the Hort Innovation Vegetable Fund.

For this project, Deon has set up his

damage to the surface. The same applies in winter. That's where cover cropping maintains the consistency."

#### PATIENCE PAYS OFF

Deon says sticking with covered cropping beyond "trying one year and not the next" was netting excellent results in terms of better yields and premium prices.

"You still have to grow the cover crop – not just put it in and forget about it. I've found to get the best out of it, you give it that little bit more and you get twice the result. It's really about keeping your cool and not using your soil when it's not fit to be used," he says.

*"It has been a revelation for us. We've never had such healthy-looking carrots"*

300-hectare farm at Forth on a four- or five-year paddock rotation, giving selected paddocks a 12-18 month rest with selected cover crops. The emphasis on quality over quantity has suppressed weeds, improved operational efficiencies and protected the soil rather than leaving the paddocks exposed to the elements.

"It has been a revelation for us. We've never had such healthy-looking carrots. There are no nematodes, the crops have beautiful green, healthy tops and they're in free-draining soil. And in terms of cultivation, the soil breaks down very easily and has plenty of organic material and worms and dung beetles," Deon says.

"Your soil is a living organism and you don't want it to die, so you want something growing in there – even if it's only a short-term cover crop, you're protecting that soil.

"Doing so over summer means you're not getting all the extremes with a 30-degree sun hitting the bare soil and doing lots of

"Because of financial imperatives there's often too much of a push on the soil but, where possible, I'd rather be rejuvenating the soil than just have a marginal crop on it.

"I've seen that one bad decision can undo a paddock for four or five years where a harvest has depleted and destroyed the soil structure. Yet after cover cropping, our horsepower, fuel and irrigation requirements are reduced, and our soil isn't as tight and bashed down as we're not trying to turn it to plant a crop in the next day.

"Likewise, with strip plots all the natural drain and nutrients are still there because you haven't smashed it up. We're back on it in no time, and there's no erosion because the water filters down from the harder bits where you've worked before."

#### LONG-TERM GOALS

Deon says the scientific tools available are improving, such as penetrometer readings,

and greater analysis by agronomists is deepening the physiological understanding of cover crops.

The project's end goal is to create a range of templates, such as booklets or guides, that highlight the estimated costs of what to grow, which cover crops and practices work best with different crops, and the expected results.

"It's my hope to follow through and produce long-term results that will benefit all. Everyone's back pocket will be helped. At the end of it, I'm sure I'll be really proud of this."

#### SUMMARY

- Project VG16068 aims to combine new science, machinery and management practices that growers, such as Premium Fresh Tasmania Farm Manager Deon Gibson, can use to improve their yields and ultimately increase prices.
- For this project, Deon has established a four- or five-year paddock rotation, giving selected paddocks a 12-18 month rest with selected cover crops. He has seen promising signs such as weed suppression and improved protection of soil as a result.
- A range of materials will also be released, including on the Soil Wealth and ICP website ([soilwealth.com.au](http://soilwealth.com.au)) that identify the approximate costs of what to grow and which cover crops and practices work best.
- *Optimising cover cropping for the Australian vegetable industry* has been funded by Hort Innovation using the vegetable research and development levy and contributions from the Australian Government.

## MULGOWIE FARMING COMPANY

### LONG-TERM INVESTMENT

Hort Innovation and Nielsen's Harvest to Home dashboard has been embraced by Mulgowie Farming Company and the business is reaping the rewards as a result.

The dashboard, which contains data from Nielsen Homescan, a continuous panel of 10,000 households who record their take-home fresh and grocery purchases from all retail outlets, has been an important contributor of data to the company's decision-making process.

Mulgowie is a family-owned producer growing conventional and organic sweet corn, green beans and broccoli across Australia. With more than 70 years' growing experience, the business' mission is to "achieve 'natural perfection' by consistently delivering quality, fresh and nutritious products through innovation and sustainable farming practices".

When illustrating its supply chain and how it connects, Mulgowie National Sales Manager Shane Quinn said the business tries to envision a circular loop rather than a linear or vertical line.

"It is important that our understanding of consumer and market trends is fed into our agronomists, growers and packhouse facility operators so that our planning for volumes required, varieties and preferred pack types are incorporated into our seasonal and long-term planning," he says.

Likewise, Mulgowie uses its knowledge of farming fresh-quality and nutritious produce to inform its product development and how it connects with consumers.

Shane says that regular team meetings are held to review all data and decide collectively what actions must be undertaken to respond efficiently to consumer needs.

#### CONNECTING THE DOTS

Harvest to Home illustrates how Mulgowie's produce categories are progressing, relative to others. It provides

indicators as to whether their initiatives are outperforming other categories and, equally importantly, also delivers key advice on which produce categories consumers are trending towards and away from. This is critical in influencing the company's future crop selection.

But the circular supply chain planning does not end there. Shane emphasises that it is paramount to combine this valuable data with other crucial information.

"We gather data shared by our retail, export and other customers, by our own regular observation of how people are shopping in store, what innovation is making its way to the shelf and overseas trends reported in the media and at conferences," he says.

"We then try to knit all of those diverse threads together into a coherent whole, which can aid us in 'considering the consumer' at a deeper level.

"I'd like other growers to understand that you don't need to spend a lot of money to get the data we need. I think Hort Innovation and AUSVEG are getting better and better at sourcing, compiling and sharing market and consumer information, plus there are other sources out there.

"The trick for us is to commit to gather it and consider it in an organised way that is aligned to our own capabilities to action."

Shane is keen to point out that while quantitative data from Nielsen provides time-specific evidence, it inherently focuses on what has already occurred. The key is to look forward.

"Some qualitative consumer data about trends from Hort Innovation, specific to categories, would also be useful for us to identify future trends and how to trigger consumer response. This has been provided in the past and I'd like it to continue," he says.

In essence, Shane said the three actions

where Harvest to Home most benefited Mulgowie in efficiently meeting consumer needs are:

- Informing a team who are passionate about growing, packing and distributing quality fresh vegetables while always keeping consumers' interests top of mind.
- Investment in new product development.
- Having objective third-party data, as this helps build a business case to justify that investment.

#### SUMMARY

- The Harvest to Home dashboard (MT17017) has been put to valuable use by Mulgowie Farming Company in assessing the quantity and direction of consumer demand.
- Through the dashboard, National Sales Manager Shane Quinn and the Mulgowie team have been able to collate qualitative data on consumers' purchasing behaviour for fresh produce as well as 'historical' quantitative data. It has proved extremely beneficial in ensuring that the business and its supply chain are aligned on key goals to meet consumer demand.
- *Vegetable Cluster Consumer Insights Program (Harvest to Home)* has been funded by Hort Innovation using the onion, sweetpotato and vegetable research and development levies and contributions from the Australian Government.

# SATISH CHAND

## ENHANCING THE FUTURE FLAVOUR

Satish Chand says organic production at one of Australia's most-recognisable vegetable brands brings many unique challenges, but the invaluable networking opportunities and knowledge gained at the 2017 East Gippsland Vegetable Innovation Days have gone some way towards overcoming these hurdles.

As General Manager - Farms at Coolibah Herbs — the self-labelled "masters of mesclun" — Satish says the Pearcedale-based business on Victoria's Mornington Peninsula is widely known in wholesale and retail markets across Australia.

The grower, supplier and distributor of washed salad greens, mixed leaves and culinary herbs has evolved from a market garden enterprise in the 1980s to supply leading companies in the food sector industries, at home and abroad.

**"Attending [East Gippsland Vegetable Innovation Days] really helped the business to identify the best standard practice"**

One of the challenges Satish faces to keep Coolibah ahead of the pack is dealing with frequent customer and end-user enquiries about its organic production.

But the event at Bulmer Farms in May 2017 helped Satish address many of the customer enquiries in person, while also acquiring excellent research and development insights via the demonstration sites hosted by the top 10 seed companies in Australia.

The East Gippsland Vegetable Innovation Days (EGVID) were hosted by agronomist Stuart Grigg and Bulmer Farms' Managing Director Andrew Bulmer in Lindenow, Victoria. It was a major event for the East Gippsland Food Cluster (VG15047) as part of the National Vegetable Extension Network, a strategic levy investment under the Hort Innovation Vegetable Fund.

### SOWING THE NETWORKING SEED

Promoted on social media with its Facebook page, the two-day EGVID

provided updates on the Hort Innovation strategic levy investment, Robot for Intelligent Perception and Precision Application (RIPPA), as well as an industry dinner and innovative developments to increase sustainability in the industry and improve producers' bottom lines.

"Attending really helped the business to identify the best standard practice," Satish says.

"A lot of seed companies have provided the support in supplying the best varieties so that the business can thrive. The seed companies were there to support us through high-yielding and disease-resistance varieties. This has helped us by minimising the cost of production overall at farming levels."

As a result of attending the event, Satish said Coolibah Herbs has enhanced its "solid"

relationship with industry stakeholders in Australia and export markets.

The hands-on interaction at EGVID also complemented his participation in the Growing Leaders program, which focuses on personal, business and industry change and management.

A strategic levy investment under the Hort Innovation Vegetable Fund, *Growing Leaders* (VG15030) is the only national leadership and development program tailored for the vegetable industry. Its content has exposed Satish to handling conflict; delivering effective communication; holding efficient meetings; high-performance team building; managing change; and negotiating the media.

"This program has given us even more insight into the leadership and management quality at all levels in the industry," Satish says.

"I sent another staff member this year for the same program and will continue in the future for more training."

### ONGOING INDUSTRY PARTICIPATION

Like-minded support, both technical and constructive, has proven to be a cornerstone that keeps Satish and Coolibah Herbs thriving and strategically focused on future pathways.

"Most importantly, we are customer-focused and supply the best and freshest produce. We are the leaders in organic salad production and this is the key strength of the business. We have been involved in innovation and technology all the way and will continue to attend most industry events," Satish says.

"We, as a business, need to be sustainable all along the way and have been lucky to have support of the industry, which gives us invaluable insight into where the market growth is and how best we can grow with it."

### SUMMARY

- Through the 2017 East Gippsland Vegetable Innovation Days (EGVID), Project VG15047 exposed growers including Coolibah Herbs General Manager - Farms Satish Chand to industry-leading innovations, R&D and networking events in the heart of one of Australia's key salad production regions, Lindenow in East Gippsland, Victoria.
- Promoted on social media, the two-day EGVID provided multiple networking opportunities as well as updates on innovative developments to increase sustainability in the industry and improve producers' bottom lines. Satish says that attending the EGVID and similar forums has strengthened relationships between Coolibah Herbs and other industry stakeholders in Australia and overseas.
- *Regional capacity building to grow vegetable businesses - Victoria Gippsland (East Gippsland Food Cluster)* has been funded by Hort Innovation using the vegetable research and development levy and contributions from the Australian Government.



Photography by Luka Kauzlaric.



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