



# ONIONS AUSTRALIA 2022

INDUSTRY  
COMMUNICATIONS  
WRAP UP

2022 REG MILLER  
RECIPIENT

PROMOTING  
AUSTRALIAN ONIONS



**FROM THE CHAIR**

Page 2



**NEW LIFE MEMBER AWARDED**

Page 8



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# WELCOME

## Welcome to edition 39 of the Onions Australia industry magazine.

After almost three years of COVID restrictions it's refreshing to continue publishing our annual magazine.

This year's magazine is being published without any onion industry levy funds.

It has been funded by the support of Onions Australia's key strategic partners and our membership funds.

This has been necessary after Hort Innovation awarded the onion industry's communication and extension project to Ausveg.

Given we did not want to lose almost four decades of publishing an annual magazine the decision was made to continue compiling and printing it ourselves.

We are humbled that our industry partners continue to see the value in Onions Australia as the industry's representative body. Their physical and financial support is greatly appreciated.

With that in mind we've pulled together a wrap up of industry highlights from 2022, in what has once again been a busy year.

Work has been progressing on some valuable industry projects, which look to have wide ranging benefits for Australian growers.

We will keep you updated through our industry communications – again which are funded solely by Onions Australia, without any levy funding.

But rest assured the Onions Australia office remains the first port of call for all industry queries.

We look forward to continuing to work for our growers.

# CONTENTS

From the Chair.....	02
From the Office.....	04
Onions Communications Wrap Up.....	06
Industry stalwart honoured with life membership.....	08
Promoting Australian onions to health and food service professionals.....	10
2022 Reg Miller Award recipient - Julian Shaw .....	12
Managing issues, avoiding a crisis: Reputation and the Australian Onions Industry .....	14
Tailem Bend 2022.....	18
Annual onion crop walk 2022.....	20
Fusarium basal rot - what is known about it? .....	22
State round up.....	24
Business directory .....	28 & 30
Strategic partners.....	32



### Onions Australia Executive Committee

Peter Shadbolt  
Darren Rathjen (Chair)  
Alan Thierry  
Jason Daniell  
James Smith  
Tim Groom  
Jarryd Dolling  
Lewis Lydon  
Dean Metcalf  
Mark Dobson

### Chief Executive Officer

Lechelle Earl

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# FROM THE CHAIR

We find ourselves at the end of 2022 facing a wall of water coming down the Murray Darling Basin.

Recent weeks have seen growers along the river building levees and moving infrastructure – myself included.

Wet weather in the eastern states has resulted in flows not seen along the river in decades, however not much damage is expected for our crops downstream.

As a nation we've experienced challenging conditions thanks to the La Nina weather events, which continue to wreak havoc.

Queensland has done it tough, with wet weather causing flooding in the Lockyer Valley earlier this year and delaying planting for many.

New season onions are coming online, after last year's strong season which had a slight dip in yields.

This year is also looking promising, with good prices holding within the markets.

My first 12 months as Chair has been a steep learning curve, despite having served previously on the Executive Committee.

There is so much that goes on behind the scenes to ensure that the best interests of our growers are kept at the forefront.

I have been working closely with Lechelle in the office to ensure that the voice of Onions Australia is heard in the right places.

We don't feel the need as a peak industry body to speak just to hear our own voices, rather we target our advocacy straight at the source, ensuring the message is delivered clearly and directly.

We also pride ourselves on being accessible to each and every grower, ensuring that your needs are met and your questions answered.

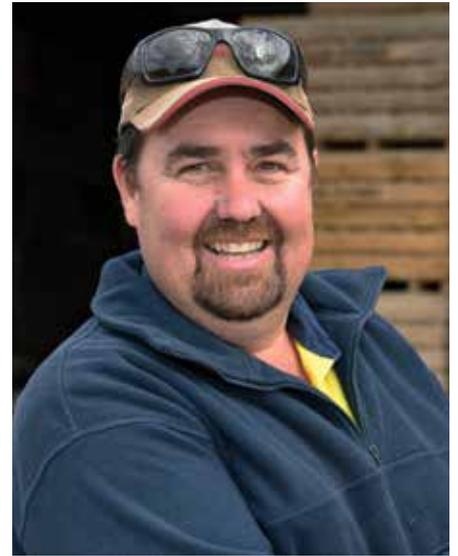
With that in mind I am keen to see Onions Australia return to regional meetings, rather than capital cities.

I'd rather we host our meetings in the growing regions to ensure that growers from all over Australia have the opportunity to attend.

Rest assured that despite Onions Australia no longer holding the communications and extension project, we remain the first port of call for all industry.

Pick up the phone or send an email and we will make sure you get the information you need.

I look forward to seeing you on-farm soon.



**DARREN RATHJEN**  
Chair OA



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# FROM THE OFFICE

Here we are emerging from almost three years of COVID-19 restrictions, where it seems everyone has been locked up, locked down or locked out.

As I write we are hearing reports of a coming fourth wave, however hopefully it will have nowhere near the catastrophic impact on our farms, economies and lifestyle in general.

After more than two years spent grounded and dealing with a seemingly daily procession of online meetings it was great to head to Brisbane earlier this year for our first face to face since 2019.

While we didn't have a huge attendance, it was good to reconnect and sit across the table for discussions, rather than to have what seemed like never-ending meetings online.

Tailem Bend proved a great success for our AGM conference, complete with the awarding of the Reg Miller Award posthumously to much respected industry member Julian Shaw.

It was also an honour to see Trevor Twigden awarded life membership to Onions Australia, recognising his many years of service to the industry.

It was great to see the return of networking, with growers coming from across Australia to gather and learn about the latest happenings in the industry.

While there have been some changes in the Onions Australia office due to alternate awarding of the industry's communications and extension project, rest assured there is plenty of work being done behind the scenes.

OA Chair Darren Rathjen and myself have spent the last few months meeting with a host of industry representatives, including – but not limited to – supermarkets, Hort Innovation, other peak industry bodies and suppliers.

It is always heartening to hear the high esteem in which both our office and our industry is held, demonstrating the hard work carried out by the Executive Committee.

The office will continue, as always, to advocate for growers and to ensure the industry is well positioned moving forward.

We are excited about upcoming levy-funded projects, some of which look set to have far reaching benefits for our industry.

While the future may look somewhat different, particularly with Ausveg running the onion levy funded communications and extension project, the onion industry will always be a valued segment of Australia's agriculture sector.

This means that representation may look somewhat different than what we may be familiar with, but we can optimistically see a bright future for all our stakeholders.

I would like to thank our Executive Committee, led by Darren, for their hard work during the past 12 months.

As volunteers they give their time to serve our industry, taking off their individual business hats to focus on what's best for growers as a whole.

And for that I thank them.

Here's to a prosperous harvest and bountiful prices – may 2023 bring good luck to our industry.



**LECHELLE EARL**  
CEO OA

# WHAT LEADS TO REDUCED YIELDS?

Nematodes Pink Root, Fusarium and Pythium all stunt seedling growth and this impacts on bulb sizing and firmness which leads to reduced yields. By suppressing these pests and diseases onion yields can be maximised and more dollars put into your pocket.

Strike Fumigation products have consistently delivered higher yields, greater packouts after storage, reduced soft rots and basal cracking. Fertiliser uptake efficiency has improved by a maximum of 30% and water use efficiencies have improved by up to 25%. With some fertiliser being up to \$1800/MT, fuel over \$2/L and Electricity for pumping at extortion pricing, Strike fumigation products can greatly reduce your input costs and delivering over an extra 20MT/ha in yield. Grading wastage is greatly reduced in a period when supermarkets are paying higher prices given the recent climate and supply issues with growing regions.

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## Western Australia

Consistent export quality products have been grown and after the fumigated onion crop, Growers were able to take advantage of a second crop to maximise the fumigation advantage. This reduced the cost of the first fumigation spreading it over two different crops.



Export grade fumigated Redwing Onions yielding 153MT/ha compared to 106 MT/ha with no fumigation.

## Queensland

Pink Root has been the biggest issue and Strike products have shown a major benefit in lifting profitability. Fusarium is now becoming a major problem and Growers are hoping to emulate the experience of southern Growers.



St. George area with self-mulching clay soils with Pink Root and Fusarium present.

## South Australia

The Strike treatment has meant that growers have maximised yields, reduced grading waste and increased their packout rates. Avoiding Fusarium has been the biggest benefit as it is now able to be controlled without sacrificing yields. Plants are stronger and faster out of the ground.



Red and Brown Onions after 5 months storage. No soft rots, no basal cracking and firm bulbs. Reds 110 - 150MT/ha, Browns 90 - 110MT/ha, and Whites 80 - 100MT/ha with soil fumigation.



Poor plant growth with no soil fumigation



Left: Fumigated Right: Unfumigated

# ONIONS COMMUNICATIONS WRAP UP – VN18003

## That's a wrap for the 'Australian onion industry communications program' (VN18003).

Commencing in April 2019 and ending in June 2022, this project worked to supply stakeholders with timely, relevant, and comprehensive information to help increase levy payers' understanding of the projects being undertaken by the industry, and enable practice change.

Led by Cox Inall in partnership with Onions Australia and its executive, and funded by Hort Innovation, this three-year project was integral in providing growers and broader industry with a robust communications program that helped facilitate increased understanding and adoption of levy funded research and development (R&D).

Australia's onion industry is a significant contributor to Australian horticulture, with a farmgate value of \$203.2 million in 2020/21. Around 250 onion growers produced more than 265,000 tonnes of onions in this period, with onions grown in every state of Australia.

The Onion Industry Strategic Plan (SIP) 2017–21, which underpinned this project, identified four desired outcomes for the onion industry from levy investment over the five-year period, providing direction for the approximately \$7 million that was invested into industry R&D during this time. The outcomes were:

1. A combined marketing approach working in harmony to show the versatility of onions to increase consumption,
2. Export growth achieved through market diversification and product customization, to support and maintain domestic pricing,

3. Reduced costs and improved returns to growers through improvements in business and production skills,
4. An informed, engaged industry results in greater ability to respond to market shifts.

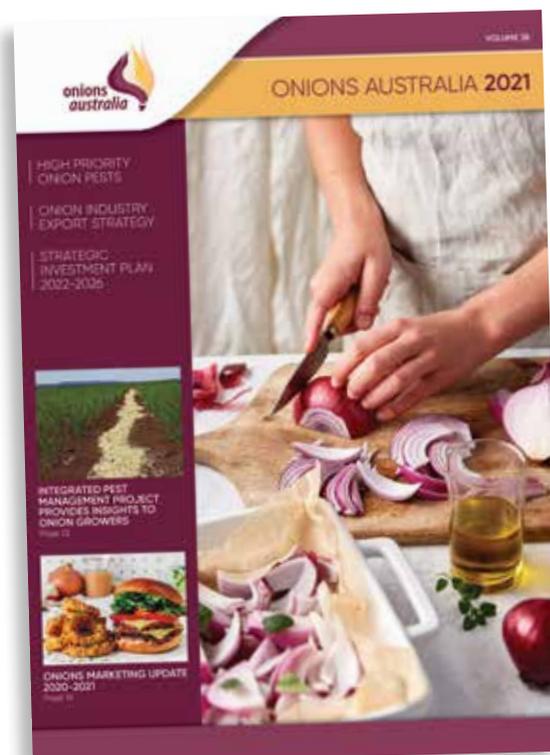
Throughout the project, Cox Inall and Onions Australia developed a comprehensive portfolio of outputs across a range of different channels, sharing the latest updates and information on the onion levy fund, Hort Innovation and marketing initiatives, and profiling levy payer adoption and best practice on farm whilst highlighting the role of key stakeholders such as Hort Innovation and Onions Australia.

A series of high-quality communications outputs were delivered to equip growers and the broader onion industry with the latest best practice resources and R&D outcomes.

Across the three-year project, this included the delivery of:

- An annual, full colour, 44-page printed magazine
- An annual disease alert poster
- A quarterly online eNewsletter
- Eight industry podcasts
- Six research and development focussed videos
- Seven written case studies.

The target audience was levy payers, supply chain participants and allied industries. Feedback received throughout the project was positive, with strong reach of outputs.





Outputs covered a broad range of topics, relevant to industry needs and key levy project outcomes. Case studies provided on-the-ground examples of best practice on key topics from export strategies and managing pests to education program that assist in business management. Podcasts allowed growers to get information while on-the-go, whilst the annual magazine offered growers a one-stop resource of all project updates, seasonal updates and more. All outputs sought to keep growers closer to levy-funded information, enabling them to make educated business decisions on their own farms.

The four key objectives established through the communications in VN18003 were:

- Increased industry understanding, awareness and adoption of production best practice, emerging production information and relevant outcomes related to R&D project outcomes and outputs.
- Provided knowledge transfer to the onion industry value chain on research findings, best practice and emerging risks and opportunities in technologies and innovations.
- Created a better-informed industry to increase farm productivity and profitability, and product quality across businesses of all sizes.

- Promoted Hort Innovation membership and engagement with the national R&D program to all onion levy payers.

To access outputs delivered through VN18003, head to the Onions Australia website: [www.onionsaustralia.org.au](http://www.onionsaustralia.org.au)



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# INDUSTRY STALWART HONOURED WITH LIFE MEMBERSHIP

Long time onion industry member Trevor Twigden has been recognised with life membership of Onions Australia.

Trevor was instrumental in the early days of Onions Australia, serving as Executive Committee Chair in the 1990s.

He worked closely with Judi Prosser who started as secretary after Reg Miller died.

This was a period of great change and expansion of the organisation.

Trevor was involved in the creation of the annual magazine, which evolved from the organisation's regular newsletter.

He worked hard to promote national nature of Onions Australia, holding meetings in all onion growing states and areas.

It was under Trevor's watch that the organisation changed to electronic record keeping, as well as the expansion of the secretary's position to become that of Executive Officer.

He was also instrumental in developing the National Onion Levy, which allowed for R&D funding to be allocated to the industry.

Trevor was an advocate for onion growers, constantly battling supermarket influences in the market, both from his home base in SA and at meetings.

He was a keep supporter of the red onion market in Australia, as well as field visits and research and development progress.

Trevor spent time overseas for the benefit of the Australian industry, visiting Pukekohe, New Zealand with mostly SA onion growers/OA members to look at onions.

Trevor Twigden was presented with Onions Australia life membership by industry stalwart, and fellow life member, Steve Rathjen.

He attended the International Symposium on edible Alliaceae in Mendoza, Argentina, and was part of the Australian delegation in Beijing, China, in 2004.

Trevor was the convenor of the symposium when it was hosted in Adelaide in 2001, having spent several years coordinating to bring the event to Australia.

He also undertook a trip to the US with Dr John Golding in 2003 to research onion pungency testing and red onions.

This was not the first time Trevor has been recognised by Onions Australia, having previously received the prestigious Reg Miller Award in 1998.



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# PROMOTING AUSTRALIAN ONIONS TO HEALTH AND FOOD SERVICE PROFESSIONALS

Onion nutrition education program for health professionals and the food service industry (VN20002) is tracking into its second year of delivering evidence-based research and nutritional information about Australian onions.

The VN20002 project is being delivered by *Bite Communications* in conjunction with *Straight To The Source* and Accredited Practising Dietitian Teri Lichtenstein.

The most recent Australian Health Survey, conducted in 2011-2013, found that Australian adults consume an average of 3g of onion per day. In contrast, consumers in the United States and Europe have been found to consume twice as many onions as Australians,

showing there is significant room for improvement amongst local consumers.

Healthcare professionals and the food service industry have been identified as two of the most significant influencers of consumer food behaviour.

In order to improve the limited knowledge and understanding of onions, and increase consumption by Australian consumers, this project has created a dedicated online Australian Onions nutrition hub for health and food service professionals, compiled by a team of Accredited Practising Dietitians and culinary specialists. This online hub is a one-stop-shop for regular updates on the latest research into the nutrition and health benefits of onions and the latest nutrition and culinary inspiration.

Key resources available via the hub include a range of patient and culinary resources plus engaging video content from our Onion Farm Tours and hospitality workshops such as Fine Foods Australia, showcasing how onions can be used as the hero of a dish and sharing inspirational content straight from the farm.

Another core activity to strengthen connections with health professionals is participation in health professional conferences to spread awareness of the nutrition benefits of onions. Australian Onions established a trade exhibit at the Dietitians Australia conference at the Adelaide Convention and Exhibition Centre in SA in August 2022, delivering high level engagement with more than 800 dietitians working in clinical, community and public health sectors.



The latest nutrition research from the scientific literature has been updated in the Onions Health and Nutrition Report. The report uncovers the latest research into the powerful health benefits of enjoying red, white and brown onions every day for all Australians, demonstrating that Australian Onions are the nutrition ninja of the vegetable world.

The program is continuing to work closely with healthcare and food service professionals to amplify the health benefits and culinary uses of Australian onions to consumers, with the ultimate goal of driving onion purchase and consumption.



For more information on the program, please visit [www.australianonions.com.au/health-professionals](http://www.australianonions.com.au/health-professionals) or contact Bite Communications Program Manager, Penny Eustace [penny@bitecom.com.au](mailto:penny@bitecom.com.au)

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# 2022 REG MILLER AWARD RECIPIENT – JULIAN SHAW

Julian Shaw had a distinguished agricultural career and made a significant contribution to the Australian onion industry. He is a worthy recipient of the Reg Miller award.

Sadly, Julian passed away in January and was not able to receive the award at Tailem Bend in October, the first time Onions Australia have been able to meet since the start of the pandemic.

Julian grew up on a farm near Ulverstone, Tasmania. He studied agricultural science at the University of Tasmania. After graduating he commenced work with Vecon Pty Ltd, at that time the largest packer of onions in the southern hemisphere. Twelve months later he moved on to work for Glaxo Smith Kline, a major processor of opium poppies. Julian developed an improved weed control program for the poppy industry and being an entrepreneurial sort of person, he approached Peter Gilham, the owner of Vecon Pty Ltd, suggesting he could make improvements to the onion weed control program based on what he had learnt from his work on poppies. Soon after Julian left Glaxo and was given the responsibility for the agronomy of all Vecon's onion crops. JR and JS Shaw Agricultural Consulting was born. Julian's development of the use of ethofumesate (Tramat) in onions is still a main part of the weed control program in Tasmania today.

Julian branched out providing independent agronomy services to growers of other vegetable crops and employed and mentored several other young agronomists. The business name was changed to Agronico, and he commenced a research arm of the business that went on to conduct research on

Botrytis in onions, amongst other things. He served on the Onion Industry Advisory Committee for HAL and the Onion SIAP for Hort Innovation.

Julian worked on pyrethrum at Glaxo and became involved with CIG Pyrethrum's development of this experimental crop at the same time as he started his onion agronomy work. He started a tissue culture laboratory in a converted garage of his house to grow disease free pyrethrum plants. He then branched into tissue culture of potatoes, and this ultimately became Agronico Seed Potatoes, which now has a significant investment in cool storage and grading at Spreyton in North West Tasmania.

Julian had an incredible intellect, but it was also his sheer persistence that allowed him to solve many problems in the field and develop agronomic programs for a number of crops including onions. He could instil confidence in growers by talking up their crop and ensuring they got the most out of it.

He will be remembered for many funny sayings. He would refer to crops "growing like the clappers" or "growing like stink". When asked one day which was faster, he quickly replied that "growing like the clappers" was 10% faster than "growing like stink"!

He had a passion for running that was curtailed by a serious car accident but his passion for fly fishing never left him. However most important of all to him was the love for his family.

Julian's contribution to agriculture will be missed, but most of all we will miss his character.





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# MANAGING ISSUES, AVOIDING A CRISIS: REPUTATION AND THE AUSTRALIAN ONION INDUSTRY

I have a lot of clients that say, "It's been great working with you...but I don't want to speak to you much again".

As one of Australia's longest established public relations firms, Porter Novelli works with clients across the agriculture supply chain to deliver communications advice and support. We work with corporates, government and not-for-profits to build attention, influence behaviour, enhance reputation and mitigate risk. Issues management is a core capability.

From Victoria's biggest aviation crash, to confronting healthcare and aged care crises, to biosecurity and food supply chain recalls: Porter Novelli works through complex and explosive issues.

We help clients navigate these volatile times.

Today consumers are primed for outrage, with an increasingly sensationalist media all too happy to air any concerns. Social media spreads this outrage in an instant, connecting aggrieved parties, magnifying small issues and escalating them into a full-blown crises.

Politicians, industry stakeholders, retailers and farmer groups must be ready to work together to support the greater good, instantly.

Food safety, biosecurity and other issues are constantly ready to flare, with sometimes no notice. It can be challenging and dynamic.

Yet, the good news is, when you do the basics well – with solid, coordinated unified communications with a core, logical but effective message – you can manage reputation.

Ultimately the foundations of communications are the same, but the outcomes are on steroids. Which makes preparation and

collective agreement on process so important.

We all know that agriculture is forever changing, and we need to prepare for anything.

That's why Onions Australia has recognised the need for vigilance when it comes to maintaining reputation and has put in place a clear structure to respond and support the broader interests of Australia's onion growers.

We've worked in the onions industry since July 2021. Engaged by Onions Australia and Hort Innovation, we've set up a plan and process to ensure the reputation of the Australian onions industry is protected in the event of issue.

The team at Porter Novelli provides a "firewall" between the industry and media, 24/7. We are responsible for scanning the media environment and sharing knowledge to ensure the most effective state of readiness when an issue occurs.

Our team is concerned with five key risk areas: food safety and traceability, environment and sustainability, product quality and retail standards, workforce and industry behaviours, and broader industry issues.

Our ultimate goal is to manage risks effectively to avoid a crisis. When a crisis does break, we have the resources in place to act rapidly and coordinate our responsive effectively to protect the reputation of all onion growers.

Today we're going to reflect on a crisis within similar industries and business and apply our key guiding principles to understand the lessons we can take away from these crises.

## AUSTRALIAN STRAWBERRIES – SEPTEMBER 2018

In September 2018, social media erupted with news of needles in Australian Strawberries.

Unfortunately, when the story broke, social media was still a relatively new platform for the industry, increasing complexity of the situation.

Industry wasn't aware of the issue until it was too late – suppliers and growers didn't inform the industry and neither did retailers. By the time Berries Australia was involved, there were multiple storylines and perspectives on the issue which made it difficult to give consistent, reassuring advice.

To make matters worse, multiple stakeholders were saying different things. The Department of Health told consumers to throw their berries away. A grower shared suspicions of disgruntled workers tampering produce and police continued to refer to the incident as "contamination" instead of "tampering".

Numerous punnets of strawberries grown in Queensland and Western Australia were found to be tampered with needles. Queensland Police reported that by November 2018, there had been 186 reports of tampered strawberries nationally (source). The issue had led to copycats and created its own momentum.

As a result, truckloads of fruit were dumped, and fearful consumers stopped buying strawberries. Retailers recalled the products and export sales were affected with buyers rejecting Australian fruit.

These situations are challenging. But there are ways this situation could have been better controlled and managed.

### Our lessons

An essential part of crisis management is to ensure there are unified voices, with no silos. This means that communications from producers and industry leaders is consistent and aligned with the operational response. This ensures the story doesn't evolve and escalate unnecessarily.

To be unified, we need to focus on relationships and ensure the industry is connected to all growers, retailers, suppliers and regulators to work together in an event of an issue.

When stakeholders are aligned, it's important to communicate one message to many audiences. It is essential for key messages to be delivered to identified stakeholders and audiences through multiple channels. This ensures there is no misinformation about the issue.

While this issue significantly damaged the industry, it wasn't irreparable. After a huge effort, all players came together to coordinate communication.

They worked with stakeholders to control the message with the authorities to take heat out of the issue. They did this by:

- Not feeding the news cycle with inflammatory messages
- Aligning on a core position in the interest of consumers and the industry which they reiterated
- They had a clear process of directing all enquiries into the one central location

### OUR FINAL GUIDING PRINCIPLES

We've seen a lot of issues in our time and what's consistent is that ethical behaviour is important. Organisations must respond to issues with their social purpose in mind and have integrity, act ethically and do things right by their stakeholders and customers.

This also means protecting the greater good. Reputation management will always aim to protect and enhance the reputation of the entire industry (whilst working alongside the affected individual businesses). Reputation is fluid and the actions of one operator can easily impact the reputation of another.



Finally, testing is crucial. That's why we recently completed media skills training with Onions Australia leaders. This ensures we have unified industry voices skilled in handling public issues. We also test the issues themselves and ensure they are reviewed periodically as new information comes to light.

This article is not designed to scare you but show how good issues management can mitigate and protect reputation in every issue.

However, the industry cannot respond to an issue they don't know about.

Patrick McClelland, Managing Partner and Agribusiness Lead at Porter Novelli Australia and Nicole Gauci, Senior Consultant, presented this speech at the annual Onions Australia Conference in Tailem Bend in October. Parts of this speech have been adapted for publication.

### **If you are aware of any issue – no matter how small - that could impact the reputation of the industry, please:**

1. Call Lechelle at Onions Australia on (08) 8725 8862 to discuss the situation.
2. Do not speak publicly about the issue while the team can work to support you and the industry with a position. Onions Australia would always act to protect individual growers as well as the industry.



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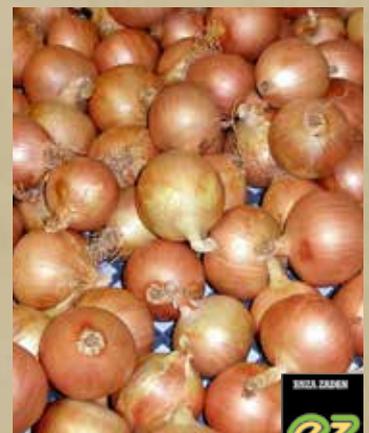
## **LUCINDA** Hybrid Brown Onion

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0407 256 521

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0418 716 131

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Nthn NSW/Wide Bay  
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Steven Williams  
0407 256 521

**National Product  
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Wet Seeds  
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# TAILEM BEND 2022

Onions Australia hosted its first face to face annual general meeting for three years at Tailem Bend in South Australia recently.

Meetings had been held online due to the COVID-19 pandemic, proving serviceable but rather impersonal.

It was great to see a good turn out at The Bend, with plenty of growers and industry representatives – as well as plenty of action on the racetrack!

The conference kicked off with an Onions Australia Executive Committee meeting, where new member James Smith was welcomed and outgoing member Greg Bragg farewelled.

That afternoon about a dozen delegates took to the Go Kart track at The Bend, where they lived out their inner rev head.

One of the highlights of the conference was the Reg Miller Award dinner, where much respected onion industry member Julian Shaw was posthumously awarded the honour, recognising his decades of service and dedication.

Friend and fellow Tasmanian Tim Groom spoke about Julian and his contribution to not only Onions Australia, but the industry as a whole.

In another special moment, fellow long time Onions Australia member Trevor Twigden was awarded life membership to the association, recognising his contribution over many years.

Dinner attendees were also given an update from Porter Novelli about the onion industry's crisis risk management plan, along with some helpful tips.

Onions Australia key strategic partners TriCal Australia kindly donated a custom-made onion-

themed fire pit to be auctioned, with fierce bidding taking place to raise a total of \$4,000 which was donated to the Royal Flying Doctor Service.

Friday started with the Onions Australia AGM, attended by 25 people.

The Levy Payers' Day then followed, which featured a range of speakers from across industry, as well as the ever-popular state round ups.

In May next year Onions Australia is planning to hold its levy payers day in Western Australia, before hosting its AGM conference in Tasmania in October.



Top: TriCal Australia's Matthew Stein donated a custom firepit for auction, with Steve and Darren Rathjen the successful bidders. The funds raised from the auction were donated to the Royal Flying Doctors Service.

Above: Onions Australia life members Steve Rathjen, Lewis Lydon, Tim Groom and Dean Metcalf with new inductee Trevor Twigden and OA Chair Darren Rathjen.

Left: The 2022 Onions Australia conference in Tailem Bend included a levy payers day with a raft of interesting speakers.

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# ANNUAL ONION CROP WALK 2022

The Murray Bridge onion growers' annual crop walk was held recently.

The event was held in conjunction with EE Muir & Sons, Campbells Fertiliser and Terranova.

The day started with breakfast. Don Thorp from Horticultural Spraying Specialist discussed sprayer nozzles and the importance of spray coverage.

Attending growers took full advantage to get involved in discussions about their sprayers.

Throughout the day onion growers visited each other's farms and discussed issues and solutions.

The event also provided an opportunity to look at different varieties of onions, while the growers were able to discuss fungicides and crop nutrition.

The day concluded with a barbecue and plenty of conversation between the growers and industry representatives attending.





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# FUSARIUM BASAL ROT – WHAT IS KNOWN ABOUT IT?

Michael Rettke, South Australian Research and Development Institute  
Hort Innovation Project VN20006: Epidemiology and management of fusarium basal rot in onions

**Fusarium basal rot is causing economically significant losses to growers in the warmer production regions of Australia, mostly late in the crop and in storage.**

Overseas this is also the case, including in Europe, the Middle East, the Subcontinent and Southeast Asia.

## WHAT IS THE CAUSE?

Globally, a wide range of *Fusarium* species have been reported to cause fusarium basal rot of onions, and the species of greatest importance in Australian onion growing areas had not previously been determined.

Our investigation indicates the pathogen most associated with the bulb rotting that is typical of fusarium basal rot in Australia is *Fusarium oxysporum* forma specialis (f. sp.) *cepae* (abbreviated to FOC). This has been ascertained by testing plant and bulb samples collected from multiple regions over the last year. Most samples with suspected fusarium basal rot symptoms were collected from South Australia, though samples came from Queensland, Western Australia, and Tasmania. Pathogens were identified by Next Generation Sequencing techniques along with traditional isolation methods. This FOC strain of *Fusarium oxysporum* has the 'Secreted In Xylem' SIX3 gene that is associated with pathogenicity to onions as published by Taylor et al. (2016).

While FOC has been found to be the dominant *Fusarium* spp. quantified in rotted bulbs, our investigations have found several other *Fusarium* species frequently infect the root systems of onions. This includes a closely related species to FOC that lacks the pathogenicity genes but may be

interacting with FOC to cause more severe field symptoms in some paddocks, similar to reported in Finland by Haapalainen (2021). Further investigation is required to understand the importance of this strain.

Now we have isolated and identified the pathogens, we can increase activity in the next stage of the project – evaluating growing practices and controls to develop an integrated management strategy for fusarium basal rot.

## Test developed for FOC

Work in the project has led to the development of a specific DNA test for *Fusarium oxysporum* f.sp. *cepae* (FOC).

The test is being used to routinely test soils and plant tissues, assisting to confirm and quantify research findings.

Moving forward, the FOC test may become a tool growers can use to identify risk from soilborne inoculum prior to planting or bulb infection prior to harvest and storage.



Photo 1: Fusarium basal rot of a bulb out of storage caused by *Fusarium oxysporum* f. sp. *cepae*.

## WHAT CONDITIONS DRIVE DISEASE?

Infection and disease development is possible within the soil temperature range 15–32°C, with growth of FOC most favoured by temperatures of 26–28°C. Below 15°C the pathogen has minimal activity. Above 32°C infection and disease development can still occur, though is less likely.

Excessive soil moisture increases the risk of fusarium basal rot.

Damage to basal plates makes them more susceptible to infection. Such damage can be caused by soil dwelling insects, nematodes, fluctuating soil moisture levels, excessive nitrogen, or weather conditions.

Summer thunderstorms can produce ideal conditions for infection; that is, warm wet conditions coinciding with potential for cracking of the basal plate.

Factors that affect development and impact of fusarium basal rot are listed in Table 1.

## GAPS IN KNOWLEDGE

Based on a review of available information there are some key gaps in our knowledge of fusarium basal rot that are being targeted for investigation. These include role of rotation, cover and nurse crops on inoculum levels in the soil; role of nitrogen form applied to crop on disease risk; efficacy of control options (cultural, biostimulants, biologicals and chemistry) against fusarium basal rot.

## Host species testing

If there is a plant species that you are using in rotation, as a cover or nurse crop, or maybe even a weed species, and you want to know if it hosts FOC (the cause of fusarium basal rot), please let the project team know so it can be included in our host screening trials!

Table 1: Factors affecting development and impact of fusarium basal rot

Driver of disease	Decreased disease risk
High pathogen inoculum level	Low pathogen inoculum level
Susceptible variety	Tolerant variety
Root and basal plate damage	Absence of pests, healthy soil biota
Other soil pathogens present	Absence of soil pathogens
Planting into warm soils	Cool conditions during early growth
Soil temperature > 26°C	Soil temperature < 15°C
Excess nitrogen	Optimum nutrition
Excess moisture, poor drainage	Uniform adequate moisture availability
Summer thunderstorms	Mild consistent weather
Ambient storage.	Cool storage.



Photo 2: Onion cut in half showing basal plate infected by *Fusarium oxysporum* f. sp. *cepae*.

### WHAT MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES MAY ASSIST?

The following is a summary from the Guide to "Fusarium basal rot: Onions".

Information based on available literature. Information will be updated to include project findings as they become available.

### KNOW YOUR RISK

- Conduct pre-plant disease risk assessment of paddocks (history, environment).
- Manage paddocks using best available practices and according to risk.

### PRE-CROP

- Extend rotation length in paddocks with known risk: > 4 years
- Control host weeds: *Oxalis* spp., *Allium* volunteers
- Improve surface and subsurface drainage if inadequate
- Grow non-host cover crop and incorporate prior to onions.
- In fumigated soil, follow with soil amendments to replace beneficial biota and improve suppression.

### CROP

- Select less susceptible varieties
- Manage other pests and pathogens that cause root damage, such as onion maggot and pink root
- Promote even growth to protect integrity of basal plate
- Optimise nutrition for balanced growth and bulb quality: Avoid excess nitrogen
- Avoid over irrigation and development of wet spots
- Plant into cooler soils where possible (<20°C).

### STORAGE

- Avoid storing bulbs with high incidence of field infection
- Store crop in cool storage at 4°C or lower, with low humidity and ventilation management to avoid condensation

#### Further information:

**Michael Rettke**  
South Australian Research and Development Institute  
[Michael.rettke@sa.gov.au](mailto:Michael.rettke@sa.gov.au)  
0401 122 124

#### References

- Haapalainen, M., Laitala, E., Ramo, S., and Latvala, S. (2021) Pathogenicity and toxin production of different *Fusarium oxysporum* isolates infecting onion (*Allium cepa* L.). *Annals of Applied Biology*.
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# STATE ROUND UP 2021/22 SEASON

## QUEENSLAND

Michael Sippel

Like a lot of growing regions across Australia, the onion season of 2022 will certainly go down as one to remember.

Or better still, forget.

The season in Southern Queensland usually begins with a handful of growers looking to sow early onions in late February, early March.

For those that were able to put seed in the ground, many acres were lost due to the flood event of March 2022.

There was much devastation across the Lockyer Valley region as the Lockyer and Laidley creeks broke their banks, leading to much erosion and loss of valuable top soil.

The region had experienced close to 10 years of drought, it had to break sooner or later.

With growers keen to get back to business, we did see a somewhat normal area of onions planted across the district in the latter part of April, early May.

The middle of May saw in excess of 20 inches of rain received in a short period, leading to widespread floods across the region once again.

Some of the crops seeded on higher ground came through, but some were again lost.

What we did see was the inability for growers to be able to get on their farms and seed any onions through the rest of the month of May.

In what is usually our busiest seeding window, many growers lost the opportunity to get a crop in the ground.

It wasn't until early June that the ground had dried sufficiently for seeding to begin again.

A mad rush then followed as growers played catch-up on area lost during the wet period.

As we enter the harvest period, overall area is down on usual due to the wet period at seeding.

Many of the crops now being harvested have been affected by the wet conditions during the growing period.

As a result, Downy Mildew and bacterial leaf diseases have been difficult to control.

To make matters worse for growers has been the shortage of key fungicides needed to control leaf disease.

It does remain to be seen just how much of the late crops will survive the wet conditions and are able to be harvested.

Growers continue to be at the mercy of the seasonal worker doing the harvest.

It is a constant source of frustration and will continue to lead growers to either innovate through machine harvesting or leave the industry.

With the market price at present strong with good demand, growers will be keen to get onions into bags to get a return on their investment.

And I must add, they will need every cent this year. Rising input costs, pressure from seasonal workers and weather related setbacks has growers questioning what next year will bring.

## TASMANIA

Tim Groom

Tasmanian growers and packers have enjoyed a reasonably successful season in 2022.

Yields were average with a lack of large bulbs but quality was mostly very good.

At the time of writing there is very little stock left in storage and what is left is committed to retailers.

Domestic wholesale markets have been strong and export demand has also been good but with a very challenging shipping situation.

Freight rates went up considerably on 2021, schedules have been unreliable and some lines struggled to provide sufficient containers.

Overall plantings are considered to be similar in 2022 to 2021.

Conditions have been wet like the rest of south eastern Australia and this may have an impact on yields and quality if it persists for too long.

Group A herbicide resistant ryegrass continues to be a major challenge in some paddocks and the industry badly needs some new approaches.

Given the serious drought that has occurred in Europe which includes the Netherlands, a major exporter to Asia, demand for 2023 should be strong.

A big unknown is where we end up with growing and packing costs and shipping costs and reliability.

## **SOUTH AUSTRALIA**

Greg Bragg

What a strange growing season we have experienced so far in South Australia.

I cannot remember a start to a growing season that we are presently experiencing.

We really have not had a spring, temperatures have been well below average.

Most of the growing areas have been suffering with persistent showery weather with very little sunny days between the cold fronts that keep hitting the state.

These very unusual weather conditions have been ideal for Downy Mildew, and as a result there has been varying levels of infection in the very early sowings, this will result with some drop in yields in the early varieties, otherwise main season sown varieties are establishing well, however some heat and sunshine wouldn't go astray.

With prices remaining high it has helped somewhat to offset the sharp increase in growing costs, this is helping growers to remain optimistic about this coming season.

New season harvest should get underway in December, all onions coming out of SA now are from cold room storage.

## **VICTORIA**

Peter Shadbolt

Our state has a small growing area and we had a good year last year.

We have had a good season this year, where we hardly needed to irrigate due to heavy rain every week.

This year's plantings look fairly similar to last year.

## **WESTERN AUSTRALIA**

Frank Merenda

Western Australia experienced a wet September, although it did not have too much impact.

The establishment of crops is looking good and first onions should be coming online in late November and early December.

We haven't heard of any mildew problems so far.

Exports were very strong and we are looking forward to a good back to back season.



# GREAT CROPS THE REWARD FOR SOUTH AUSTRALIAN ONION GROWERS

A capacity to grow great crops of onions, in some challenging conditions, provides its own rewards for Jarryd Dolling, of Dolling Produce in the south-east region of South Australia.

"Dad's been involved in onions for 40 years and I'm third generation," Mr Dolling said. "I like working with a good group of people and getting great crops."

Onions are grown at various locations in the region and are planted from April through until September.

"We will start harvesting the first week of December and push through till about first week of April, so it's a 12-month operation now," Mr Dolling said.

"We aim for an onion that is going to have a longer shelf life and skin retention, and a hardness and the firmness of the bulb itself. When you are standing in a crop of onions that is starting to push through into size it is quite rewarding."

He said onions were an intensive crop but quite rewarding when they get it right.

"There's always something that's going to bring you unstuck for a little. You just get over one challenge, and the next one arises. It feels good once you get on top of it and change things and learn from it and make improvements."

Downy mildew disease is of concern in onions and can cause major problems if the conditions are not right.

"Weather plays a massive role," Mr Dolling said. "When you start seeing thunderstorms come through, you've got to get onto it. You need to be preventing it before you get it."

He said incidences of the disease have caused major problems in the past with it appearing in the top of the plant and then moving down the canopy.

To counter Downy mildew, a preventative program is utilised each season and includes a range of chemistries.

Mr Dolling said Zorvec® Enicade® fungicide is used during times of high humidity and rain at different times of the season.

"When the weather conditions are pressing, Zorvec, is a good one to go to. It really protects the plant. I think it's just its strength. Zorvec® is one to fall back on."

He said they rotate their chemistries to reduce the risk of resistance building up so that products such as Zorvec® can be available in the long-term.

"We are not going over the top, but really using it in its time and place."

He said growing onions could be nerve wracking as they watch the weather forecasts come through, however Zorvec is an option they can use to keep disease out of the paddocks.

The enterprise grows red and brown onions, with both shorter and longer season varieties used at different stages of the year.

"We use the right varieties that fit the area and growing conditions and aim at picking the right quality so they will last for a lot longer."



Jarryd Dolling, of Dolling Produce, SA, uses Zorvec® Enicade® as a go to fungicide to protect onions when wet weather or humidity approaches.



“Dad’s been in onions for 40 years and I’m third generation. We aim for an onion that is going to have a longer shelf life and good skin retention. When you are standing in a crop of healthy onions, it’s rewarding.”

**Jarryd Dolling**  
Padthaway, South Australia

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www.agronico.com.au  
jrshaw@agronico.com.au  
Phone 03 6428 2519  
Fax 03 6428 2049  
Mobile 0408 140 129

## ASSOCIATIONS

**Onions Australia**  
Lechelle Earl  
PO Box 9420  
Mount Gambier West SA 5291  
www.onionsaustralia.org.au  
lechelle@onionsaustralia.org.au  
Phone 08 8725 8862  
Fax 08 8725 8863  
Mobile 0458 111 126

**Onions New Zealand**  
PO Box 10232  
Wellington NZ 6143  
www.onionsnz.com  
Phone 0508 ONIONS (664667)  
Fax +64 4 471 2861

## CHEMICAL COMPANIES

**TriCal Australia**  
Robyn Beck  
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www.trical.com.au  
rbeck@trical.com.au  
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## EXPORTER

**Wynyon Pty Ltd**  
Mr Tim Groom  
62A Mission Hill Road  
Penguin TAS 7316  
www.wynyon.com.au  
sales@wynyon.com.au  
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## GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS

**Department of Primary Industries,  
Parks, Water & Environment**  
Dr Ziqing Yuan  
13 St John Avenue  
New Town TAS 7008  
www.dpipwe.tas.gov.au  
Phone 03 6165 3238  
Fax 03 6278 2716  
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Fax 08 8303 9393

## GROWER/PACKER

**Bowhill Produce Pty Ltd**  
Kevin & Yvonne Smith  
7335 Hunter Road  
Bowhill SA 5238  
bowhprod@bigpond.com  
Phone 08 8570 4187  
Fax 08 8570 4188  
Mobile 0427 704 188 (Kevin)  
Mobile 0407 608 238 (Yvonne)

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**Harvest Moon**  
Mark Kable  
288 Leith Road  
Forth TAS 7310  
www.harvestmoon.com.au  
mkable@harvestmoon.com.au  
Phone 03 6428 2505  
Fax 03 6428 2952  
Mobile 0408 140 060

**Just Onions Pty Ltd**  
Cory Kent  
PO Box 832  
Belmont VIC 3216  
www.justonions.com.au  
justonions@bigpond.com  
Phone 03 5229 7499  
Fax 03 5229 7101

## LJM Produce Pty Ltd

Larry Maiolo  
RMB 3555  
Harvey WA 6220  
ljm@netserv.net.au  
Phone 08 9720 1338  
Fax 08 9720 1280  
Mobile 0417 938 819

## Moonrocks Aust

David Moon  
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Glenn Murphy  
68 Saviges Road  
Thorpdale VIC 3835  
p.vmurphy@hotmail.com  
Phone 03 5634 6267  
Mobile 0428 779 931

## Paleso Enterprises Pty Ltd

Frank De Marco  
PO Box 529  
Hanwood NSW 2680  
frank@palesoenterprises.com  
Phone 02 6968 5239  
Fax 02 6968 5250  
Mobile 0488 235 775

## Qualipac Produce Pty Ltd

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Robert Cerchiaro  
63 Nar Nar Goon Road  
Nar Nar Goon VIC 3812  
www.redgem.com.au  
robertc@redgem.com.au  
Phone 03 5942 5205  
Fax 03 5942 5448  
Mobile 0419 105 259

### Rowett Onions

Tony Rowett  
Lot 22 Hutchinsons Road  
Bordertown SA 5268  
rowettonions@bigpond.com  
tonyrowett@bigpond.com  
Phone 08 8754 6130  
Fax 08 8754 6131  
Mobile 0428 854 147

### Scotties Point Farms Pty Ltd

Peter Shadbolt  
169 Scotties Point road  
Beverford VIC 3590  
scottiespointfarms@bigpond.com  
Phone 03 5037 6742  
Fax 03 5037 6512

### Willow Produce

Clinton Griffiths  
5536 Hunter Road  
Nildotte SA 5238  
www.willowproduce.com.au  
hello@willowproduce.com.au  
Fax 08 8570 8010  
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## MACHINERY

### Dobmac Agricultural Machinery

Mark Dobson  
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Ulverstone TAS 7315  
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## MISCELLANEOUS

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Mount Barker SA 5251  
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kenborg@barkerboy.com.au  
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Mobile 0408 434 801

### Rathlyn Associates

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## PACKERS

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admin@monaghanfreshproduce.com.au  
Phone 03 5233 1207  
Fax 03 5233 1564  
Mobile 0418 523 193

## RESEARCH

### AgNova Technologies Pty Ltd

Andrew Watson  
PO Box 2069  
Box Hill North VIC 3129  
www.agnova.com.au  
info@agnova.com.au  
Phone 03 9899 8100  
Fax 03 98998500  
Mobile 0423 821 395

### Metcalf Biocontrol

Dr Dean Metcalf  
211 Wyre Forest Road  
Molesworth TAS 7140  
www.biocontrol.net.au  
metcalf@tassie.net.au  
Mobile 0409 054 323

## SEED COMPANIES

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### Seminis

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St Kilda Rd Central VIC 8008  
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darren.leslie.wood@monsanto.com  
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### Terranova Seeds Pty Ltd

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www.terrnovaseeds.com.au  
tony.higgs@tnseeds.com  
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## SERVICE & SUPPLIES

### Biological Services

James Altmann  
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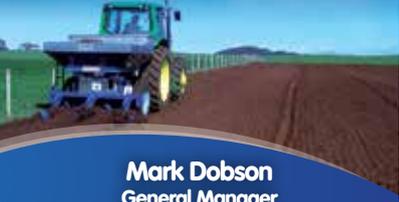
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AgNova Technologies Pty Ltd  
 PO Box 2069  
 Box Hill North VIC 3129  
 Australia  
 Phone 03 9899 8100  
 Fax 03 9899 8500  
 Email [info@agnova.com.au](mailto:info@agnova.com.au)

**Mark Dobson**  
 General Manager  
 36-38 Industrial Drive, Ulverstone  
 Tasmania, 7315 Australia  
 P: (03) 6425 5533 Int: 613 6425 5533  
 M: 0408 140 508  
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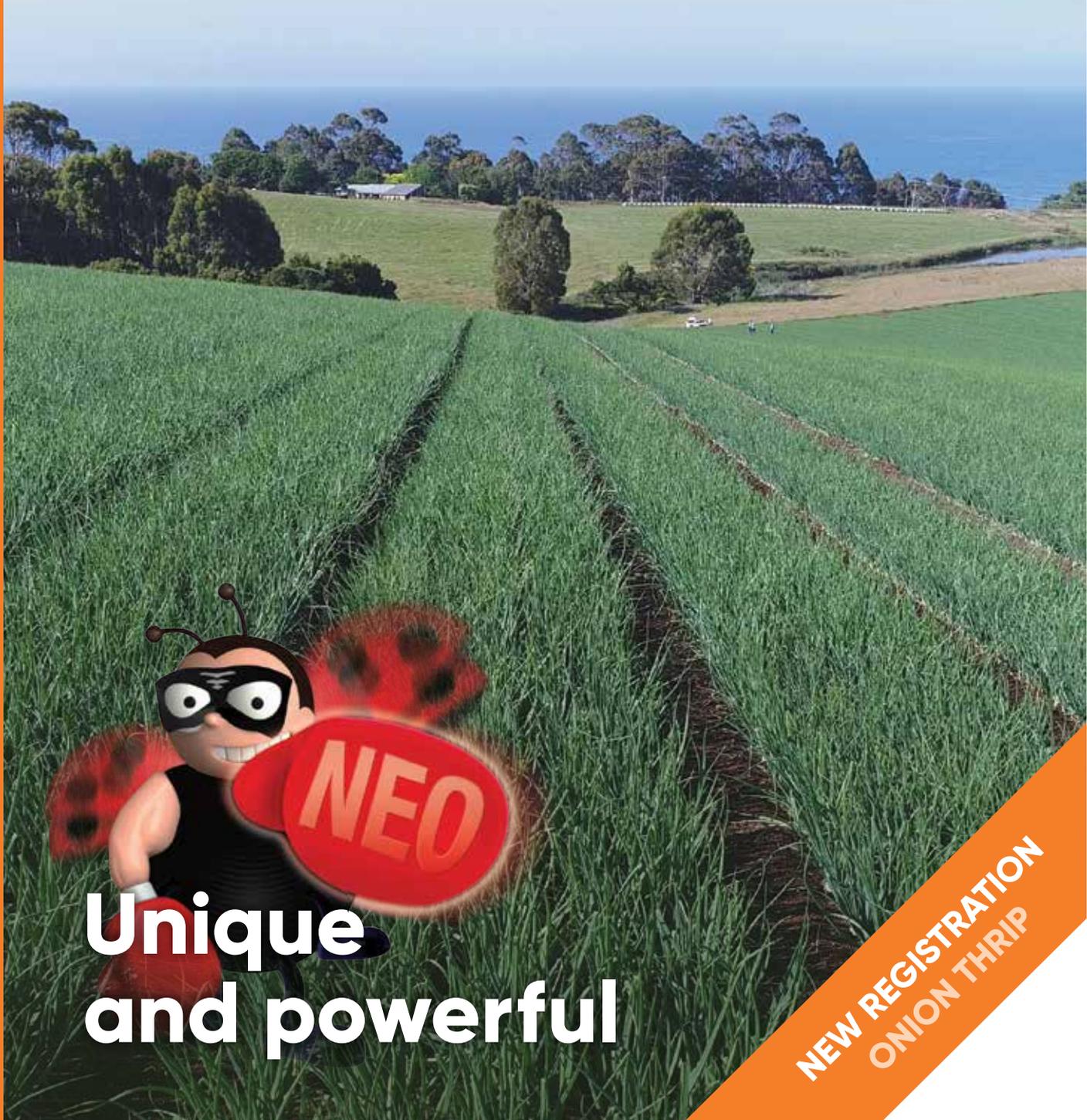



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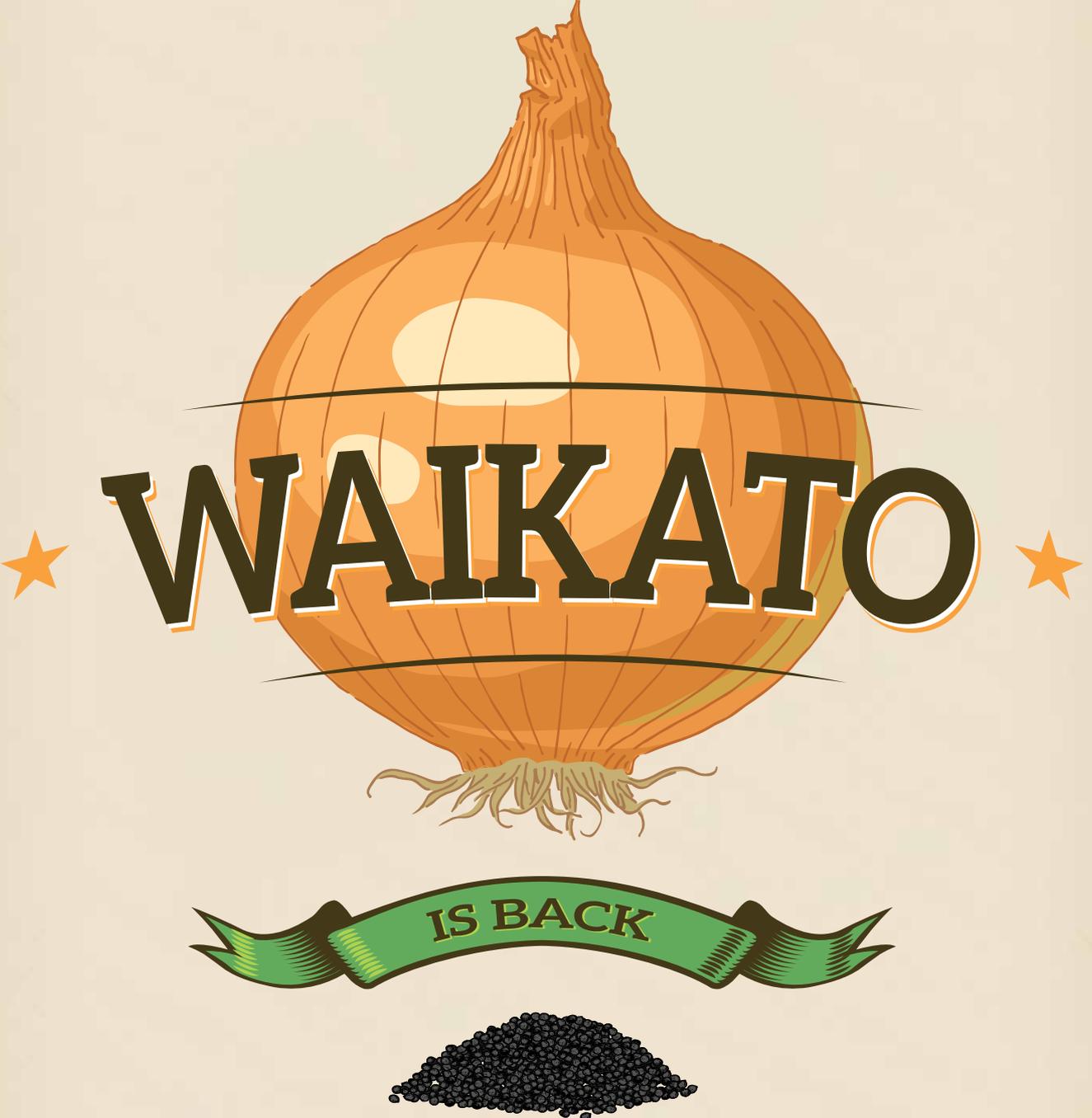
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