

Sustainable Horticulture Receives Major Boost Through Victorian Training Partnership

Goulburn Ovens Institute of TAFE and Protected Cropping Australia

Australia is now one of the world's largest producers of hydroponic lettuce and other vegetables, and 'controlled environment horticulture' is rapidly moving beyond niche status to become the face of sustainable horticulture. This, in turn, has led to new and emerging skills being identified by the industry that are not met through current national curriculum.



The rise of this industry is being driven by a number of factors: a far-reaching training partnership in Victoria, the demands of the supermarket giants for consistent vegetable production and quality, growers who seek protection against droughts and floods, and the potential for Australia's horticulture industry to save up to \$25 million annually on water and fertiliser while reducing the environmental impacts of effluent-rich water.

Graeme Smith, Chairman of industry association Protected Cropping Australia (PCA), which has a close partnership with GOTAFE, says 29 per cent of vegetable farmers already use some form of controlled cropping.

'Since Cyclone Yasi and the floods in Victoria, NSW and Queensland, we've had an enormous amount of interest from field growers who are so frustrated by having to wait six to 12 months to replant because they rely on the soil. Controlled horticulture doesn't rely on soil, so could potentially be replanted the next day,' he says.

Responding to new training needs

Since they first partnered in 2007, PCA and GOTAFE have played a major role in a review of all units in production horticulture qualifications from Certificate II to Advanced Diploma.

More than 60 units have been adapted or developed to encompass new knowledge and skills, and GOTAFE's Diploma in Production Horticulture for controlled environment horticulture is awaiting endorsement.

A second initiative in 2009, which led to the current National Greenhouse Wastewater Recycling Project, involved a pilot training program with vegetable growers on the Bellarine Peninsula and a field trip to Holland to examine how Dutch growers recycled effluent.

Leigh Taig, who teaches controlled environment horticulture at GOTAFE, is now involved with PCA in developing a short technical management course for greenhouse and hydroponic growers, covering all major elements of plant physiology, environmental management and technology management.

'Our industry has grown by 15 per cent annually over the last five years,' Mr Taig says. 'We recognise the need for a National Centre for Controlled Environment Horticulture, and will continue working with PCA to achieve that goal.'

The centre would offer facilities including centralised training, research and development, model business plans and resource efficiency initiatives.