

November 1, 2017

New high-tech facility to help meet food demand

To develop the next crop of horticulture growers and meet rising food demand, Hort Innovation and Western Sydney University have combined forces to launch the nation's first state-of-the-art vegetable glasshouse-production research centre.

Officially opened today by Assistant Minister for Agriculture and Water Anne Ruston with Minister for Western Sydney Stuart Ayres, the National Vegetable Protected Cropping Centre comprises a \$7M glasshouse that will house various industry-driven research and development projects and university course material.

The research glasshouse features eight temperature-controlled chambers and transitional glass that adjusts in colour with exterior light levels. Researchers aim to produce the highest possible commercial-yields with minimal energy, labour, nutrients and water outputs.

Hort Innovation chief executive John Lloyd said the combination of an ageing horticultural industry with a fast-moving technological landscape and a rising global demand for food means the Vegetable Protected Cropping Centre has never been more critical.

"The expected findings that will come out of this centre are exciting. Researchers will work to manipulate inputs to create the optimum environment to drive maximum harvest windows and overall yield for a variety of vegetables, then share this information with Australia's growers," he said.

"This facility also aims to attract new entrants to the horticulture industry by showcasing some of the most advanced technology currently available. The current demand for skilled glasshouse labour exceeds supply and this gap is only expected to widen. Current and future Western Sydney University students will have the opportunity to be at the forefront of this exciting time in Australian food production history."

Protected Cropping Australia deputy chair Mark Massey said it was fantastic to see the ambitious project come to fruition.

"Protected cropping is a fast-growing industry because it offers the potential to grow more produce in an environment where pests and external weather influences can largely be controlled," he said. "Setting up a glasshouse, however, is an investment, so knowing what the ideal temperature, water, nutrient and light levels are for different types of vegetables will certainly provide a great benefit to the industry."

Western Sydney University Vice-Chancellor, Professor Barney Glover, said the University is excited about the facility, which complements its long history in agriculture and horticulture research and education at the Hawkesbury campus, dating back to 1891.

"The Hawkesbury campus is located on the peri-urban fringe of Sydney – perfectly placed for conducting research and education to help drive Australia's future horticulture productivity," said Professor Glover.

"Until now, nothing like this has been developed locally to specifically suit Australia's harsh climate. This essential piece of scientific infrastructure for Australia is only possible through our partnership with Hort Innovation.

"The glasshouse and National Vegetable Protected Cropping Centre cement the University's reputation as a national leader in horticulture research and education, and continues our proud history of agriculture research and teaching at Hawkesbury."

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