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Ag-tech facility breaking new ground for horticulture

Automation, field-based sensors, weather station networks, protected cropping and supply chain tools are just some of the technologies that Australian horticulture growers will be able to test at a new \$9M “Smart Farm” facility announced today.

The Gatton Smart Farm will comprise a ‘hub’ in Queensland, and a series of ‘satellite’ farms where equipment that suits various crops or regional needs will be trialled.

Being delivered through Hort Innovation and led by the Queensland Department of Agriculture and Fisheries (DAF), the facility will give growers unprecedented access to the latest Ag-Tech on the market.

Hort Innovation Head of Extension Jane Wightman said the technologies showcased through the Gatton Smart Farm will help growers across Australia better manage plant growth and production, improve supply chain efficiency and customer satisfaction.

“Horticulture is the fastest-growing agricultural sector in Australia – with a 27 per cent hike in value over the past five years to \$15.1 billion, and our modelling shows that figure could double by 2030,” she said.

Ms Wightman said technology adoption will be key to keeping pace with this rapid growth, however, that can prove a challenge.

“It can be difficult to navigate the digital agricultural marketplace and to know where to invest,” she said.

“The Gatton Smart Farm will help growers to ‘de-risk’ Ag-Tech, by enabling them to select and experience the latest technologies firsthand and understand the costs and benefits of adoption.”

DAF Director of Vegetable, Systems and Supply Chains RD&E Ian Layden said all activities will be directed by industry demand and a range of industry partners will be consulted in the procuring of tools for use through the facility and on commercial farms.

“The technology being utilised at the Gatton Smart Farm will be targeted to address regional industry constraints and opportunities, identified through consultation with the local and regional industry,” he said.

“The focus at all times will be on ensuring all the activities that come out of it are industry relevant and delivering impact.”

Some examples of the technology the new Ag-Tech initiative will feature include:

- Climate-controlled glasshouses and a retractable roof-protected cropping structure
- Cold rooms with the latest controlled-atmosphere technology
- Technologies that can reduce labour inputs through mechanisation and automation of operations during crop production
- Latest tools and technology to manage pests such as Serpentine Leafminer, Fall Armyworm and fruit and vegetable diseases.
- Artificial Intelligence and data analytics for crop production

All research outcomes will be shared nationally through Hort innovation’s regional extension team and VegNet. Supporting partners in the initiative are Agerris, Cravo, Priva, Rijk Zwaan, Lefroy Valley Seeds, Powerplants, AIS Greenworks, Hitachi Vantara, AUSVEG, and the Australian Sweetpotato Growers Inc.

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