



Food & Fibre Gippsland Inc.

annual report 2023



Contents

WE ACKNOWLEDGE THE TRADITIONAL OWNERS OF THE LAND THAT WE MEET ON. WE PAY RESPECT TO THEIR ELDERS PAST, PRESENT AND EMERGING, AND EXTEND THAT RESPECT TO ALL ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLE.



Minister's foreword - The Hon. Ros Spence MP	3
Minister's foreword - The Hon. Gayle Tierney MP	4
Welcome from Barry Rogers, Chair	5
Report from Ben Gebert, CEO	9
Program reports	
Gippsland Smart Specialisation (GS3).....	15
Supporting the vegetable industry and its people.....	19
Workforce employment.....	25
Vic Hub - South East Node Lead.....	29
Members and strategic partners.....	35
Gippsland Trusted Provenance brand.....	39
Marketing and communications.....	41
The 10 th International Spinach Conference.....	43
VicVID 2023: Victorian Vegetable Innovation Days.....	47
Our board and our team	51





Foreword:

Minister for Agriculture
Minister for Community Sport
Minister for Carers and Volunteers

The Hon. Ros Spence MP

As the newly appointed Minister for Agriculture in October this year, I have quickly come to appreciate the importance of Victoria's agricultural production to the nation's food and fibre exports, and Gippsland farmers and food producers are key to this success.

Most Victorians who live and breathe the agriculture sector would know that despite making up just three per cent of nation's arable land mass, Victoria accounts for more than one quarter of Australia's agricultural production, leading the nation in food and fibre exports.

Victoria's ability to generate premium food and fibre produce that is sought-after regionally and globally is unrivalled, and the Victorian Government is committed to working closely with industry and communities to ensure the industry thrives.

The importance of the agriculture industry to the Victorian economy cannot be understated, and now provides \$20.2 billion in value – a new record. And it is a key employer across

regional Victoria, with 75 per cent of the state's almost 70,000 jobs in agriculture production located in our state's regions, of which Gippsland plays a major role.

As we work together to continue to grow the agriculture industry, I commend Food & Fibre Gippsland for the leadership and support it provides to our farmers.

I look forward to working closely with Food & Fibre Gippsland to ensure the ongoing success of the state's food and fibre sector right across Gippsland.

Foreword:

Minister for Skills and TAFE Minister for Regional Development



The Hon. Gayle Tierney MP

Congratulations to Food & Fibre Gippsland on another successful year leading, innovating and collaborating across Gippsland's food and fibre sector.

Food & Fibre Gippsland continues to focus on capacity-building, innovation and knowledge-sharing to maximise outcomes for the sector and support producers, manufacturers and local communities.

Gippsland's food and fibre sector is a significant component of the regional economy, contributing an estimated \$7 billion of gross regional product. The sector is strong and diverse and includes dairy, forestry, meat and horticulture, fishing, wild catch and aquaculture. Through a range of projects and programs, the team at Food & Fibre Gippsland has remained focused on enhancing the sector and ensuring that it is well placed for continued expansion.

Work continues across the sector as it rises to meet challenges of enhancing productivity, climate change adaptation (including drought preparedness), and responding to the increased frequency of natural disasters and extreme weather events.

Food & Fibre Gippsland has reinforced its reputation as a trusted partner

across a range of programs. These include the unique Regional Investment and Attraction Project (RIAP). RIAP is a partnership of Regional Development Victoria, CSIRO and Food & Fibre Gippsland that aims to increase the economic return from food and fibre produced in the regions.

Food & Fibre Gippsland's contribution to the RIAP is grounded in its understanding of local, regional, national and global contexts and its ability to identify and take advantage of emergent trends to facilitate job creation, support skill development and attract and secure talent within the region.

The achievements of Food & Fibre Gippsland have been made possible through the dedication and energy of a professional, committed, resilient and adaptable team.

To the outgoing CEO of Food & Fibre Gippsland, Nicola Pero, thank you for your years of tireless and dedicated work. Your leadership and expansion of Food & Fibre Gippsland's influence has secured its reputation as a valued and respected industry partner. I look forward to continuing to work with Food & Fibre Gippsland under the leadership of incoming CEO, Ben Gebert.

Welcome from Barry Rogers, Chair

I am delighted to be able to present this year's annual report detailing the activities of Food & Fibre Gippsland Inc.

I want to begin by acknowledging the work of several former board members who departed the organisation this year.

We celebrate and show deep gratitude to Andrew Bulmer, Kate Wallis, Sallie Jones, and Stephen Angus for their contributions to F&FG and for volunteering their time and expertise to F&FG's governance. Organisationally, we benefitted from their advice and support, and the positive impact of their expertise in guiding F&FG towards the achievement of our goals, and for our region. Andrew, Kate, and Sallie were all members of the organisations which amalgamated to form Food & Fibre Gippsland and Stephen joined the board subsequently.

Thank you each.

Our CEO's report references the work and commitment of the F&FG team, and the work of our CEO Nicola Pero in detail.

Nicola became our CEO at the same time as I became Chair – a time of much change, quickly impacted by COVID-19 and the difficulties brought with it!

Nicola's single-minded commitment to F&FG was outstanding and fantastic; her connections, knowledge and passion for the job, the sector, and Gippsland were exemplary. I particularly wish to

thank her on behalf of the board for the many, many hours spent in pursuit of the goal to see us established as the peak body for the sector.

Thank you, Nicola – it's been a pleasure working with you.

Food & Fibre Gippsland's role is to support the entire 'end to end' value chain of food and fibre production, processing, distribution, and wholesale/retail of everything from milk, vegies such as lettuces, red meat, wool (and other fibres), and poultry that grows in Gippsland!

Our members are the growers, makers, chefs, cafés, farmers, and every other component of the industry. Perhaps the single most important role we fulfil is to enable the connection between members – and networking events are



often the most effective. I look forward to many more of these in the new year.

F&FG is significantly engaged with all levels of government – local, state, and federal and with government agencies – some of whom attend our board meetings as contributing observers. They bring valuable knowledge and advice to the board, which we believe benefits us all.

Finally, I want to congratulate our new CEO, Ben Gebert and thank him for his support for and commitment to food and fibre. Ben is a farmer at heart, passionately committed to environmental stewardship – on his land and across the region; he may have grown up in the northwest of the state, on a dryland farm, but now proudly farms in Gippsland – walking the walk, whilst also talking the talk!

The board looks forward to growing F&FG under Ben's stewardship.

And finally, - thank you to all our members and supporters for your role in making such an important difference in people's lives.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Barry Rogers". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Barry Rogers, Chair



Report from Ben Gebert, CEO

This annual report marks the first that I have had the pleasure of penning a CEO's address for, and reflects on the considerable work undertaken by the F&FG team and partners to add voice and value to the lifeblood of the Gippsland region – the food and fibre sector. I am confident that the thoughtful updates contained within will provide you with a strong sense of the passion; expertise; and collaborative approach taken by our organisation to address the needs and wants of our stakeholders and partners in an ever-changing environment, both internally and externally.

Before progressing further, I would like to recognise and warmly thank Nicola Pero, who departed from the F&FG CEO position mid-year. Nicola's tenure with F&FG saw our organisation establish a new business structure following the amalgamation between the East Gippsland Food Cluster and Agribusiness Gippsland; grew our profile exponentially; generated the revenue foundation on which our current organisation stands; and established a high-performing team of passionate, experienced individuals who come to work daily to improve outcomes for our region and industry. As a mentor, Nicola had a strong hand in my own development and succession at F&FG, for which I am very grateful. Thank you for your many contributions, Nicola.

Our people and their relationships with our sector and stakeholders continue to be the key to our success as an organisation, with 2023 being no different. We welcomed new team members, farewelled others, and saw our team both expand and contract with changes to funding programs. Despite these changes, we celebrate the immense contribution that each and every one of our staff and contractors made during the year and their tenure with F&FG. We acknowledge the contributions made by Bonnie Dawson, who vacated her tightly-held spot as



our VegNET Regional Development Officer – aptly filled by Emily Scott, who took on both the Informed and Supported Workers Program alongside the VegNET RDO role. The finalisation of our Connect2Employment program during 2023 saw the departure of Rachael Kelso, Mandy Spitzer, Ben Macdonald, Stacey Borg, Kellie Lewis, and Melissa Gijsbers. Together with Amanda Gould, Amber Potocnik and Brodie Anderson – all of whom were able to redeploy into new roles – this team worked with many hundreds of jobseekers and businesses to facilitate meaningful employment outcomes and reduce barriers, providing critical support to our industry and communities. David Grimmond, a long-term team member and continued supporter of F&FG, successfully completed his work on export development and lifecycle mapping projects, whilst Elena Nauta returned to F&FG after a stint with our partner, The Latrobe Valley Authority. Luke Townsend, our talented industry placement student, joined us to work on industry innovation opportunities such as industrial hemp, completing a power of work and leaving an impressive legacy for someone only with us for six months! Janet Robertson shifted from the Informed and Supported Workers (ISW) program into managing our work on Sustainable Hunting, which she finalised in November, and Peter Mogridge, who also worked on the ISW program, finished up earlier in the year.



The F&FG governance team saw some changing of the guard during 2023, with a number of board members departing the organisation. We celebrate and show deep gratitude to Andrew Bulmer, Kate Wallis, Sallie Jones, and Stephen Angus for their contributions to F&FG and for volunteering their time and expertise to F&FG's governance. I have been fortunate to benefit personally from their advice and support, but moreover, have witnessed the positive impact of their expertise in guiding F&FG towards the achievement of our goals as an organisation, and for our region. As is the case with our current board members, having the backing and input from food and fibre experts; business owners; and regional champions provides us with guidance required to ensure our efforts generate maximum value for our industry and communities.

Collaborative partnerships were integral to F&FG's approach over the last year, with the forging of new relationships and continuation of established ones being a key focus for all areas of the organisation. We place a lot of stock in this approach and believe it's the most effective way to ensure that the right people are at the table; resources are used effectively; all angles are considered; and benefit is maximised. With an El Nino declaration during 2023, and the adage of "if you're not in drought, the next is around the corner" continuing to loom large, our collaboration for the delivery of drought preparedness activities shines through as an example of what can be achieved together.

We are particularly thankful for the collaborative will of GagG's General Manager, Jen Smith, and CEO, Trevor Caithness, which has seen our relationship deepen and enabled outstanding direct benefit for the region from the Drought Hub funding. The Drought Hub approach has also seen "Cross Hub" collaboration between states, and Node to Node collaboration within Victoria. Julian Hill, our Drought Node Lead, has been instrumental in brokering partnerships for projects and staff with organisations such as the South Gippsland Landcare Network and West Gippsland Catchment Management Authority.



Projects such as those detailed later in this report allow us to test new technologies and concepts whilst providing our growers and producers an opportunity to see them in action. This approach minimises risk and makes practice improvement considerably more accessible.

Sustainability and innovation remained as guiding principles behind a number of the projects we engaged with, or took on during the year. Our long-held and highly-valued partnership with the Latrobe Valley Authority continued to provide the conditions for us to facilitate stimulating discussion about our region's future industries. We forged a new relationship with the Trade Council of Denmark, focussed on bringing their excellence in innovation to Gippsland (and vice-versa), and continued our engagement with and membership of a number of Co-operative Research Centres (CRCs) including Fight Food Waste CRC; Future Food Systems CRC and Food Agility CRC. Each of these organisations have highly-skilled teams working on leveraging opportunities for our industries, and solving the wicked challenges. We see our role as ensuring that our local industry is represented, and bringing back some of the knowledge generated to ensure Gippsland benefits. On the knowledge front, we were fortunate to work with an increased number of knowledge and training institutes, locally and across the nation in 2023. Deakin University were a



major supporter of F&FG through 2023, both on the seaweed project through the Blue Carbon Lab, and as a partner in the Drought Hub; Melbourne University worked with us on multiple Drought Hub-related projects (as host of the Hub, but also in a discretionary capacity); RMIT continued to support our Smart Specialisation work and invited our participation in more conferences and knowledge sharing opportunities than I can count (thanks, Bruce Wilson!); our local university, Federation University, continued to play a critical role in many of our projects and as observers on our board; and we strengthened our relationship with Latrobe University considerably through our role as Co-Lead of the joint CSIRO, Regional Development Victoria Regional Investment Attraction Project (among other initiatives). We were pleased to work closely with TAFE Gippsland and the Gippsland Tech School on regional skills priorities and career pathways development, and thank Laura Macpherson and Paul Boys for their ongoing support and engagement. We highly value our relationships with our university, research and training partners – these institutes are vital to the evolution of our industries, as well as ensuring we have the human capital and skills to support our ambitions.

Regional leadership and advocacy continued to feature strongly as a focus for F&FG in 2023. Our relationship with One Gippsland and position on the

organisation’s board saw Barry Rogers and I head to Canberra with our LGA and industry colleagues to fly the Gippsland flag at a Federal level, alongside many spirited regional discussions with each other and our local MPs back home. We strongly believe in One Gippsland’s role of advocating for the diverse needs of



the region and thank the organisation's partners for another strong year. We have been pleased to be offered a continued seat at the table on countless local, state and federal committees and forums that influence policy and investment decisions locally for our industry, and continue to seek opportunities to grow the profile of our industry. Our team has also presented at numerous conferences on the nature of our work, ranging from industrial hemp to hydrogen and everything between. Each time we do this, we meet with interested individuals and businesses who often become supporters of the work we do, and add value through their insights and engagement.

Ensuring value for members has been ever-present in my mind, and the minds of our team during 2023. F&FG is an organisation supported by members who believe in the role we play in adding value to our industry, and who trust us to adequately support their individual organisations and endeavours. We feel immense responsibility to the many member organisations who choose to support us with their hard-earned money and time, and are proud to represent the diverse businesses; sub-sectors; and interests of these great businesses that make up our region's \$7bn value chain. We celebrate the achievements of our member organisations and extend our heartfelt gratitude to those who continue to support us. After a couple of years of online-only engagement, we were

pleased to host a number of member networking events, expertly curated by Phoebe Hicks, our Relationship Manager. These were well-attended and it was pleasing to see new relationships being formed; open sharing occurring; and lots of good local produce being consumed! As a farmer with a food and fibre business, I often find myself sitting at the kitchen table considering the value proposition associated with membership, and reflect on the many different ways an organisation like ours could add further value to our members' and strategic partners' businesses – both from a bottom line perspective, and from a softer, intangible perspective. Looking forward to 2024, F&FG will be taking a very hands-on approach to garnering input from members and partners about how we generate value.

Thank you for reading this report. I encourage anyone who wishes to learn more, or provide feedback to us on the future of F&FG to reach out to myself or members of the team directly. We look forward to your engagement in 2024, and thank you for your support.

Gippsland Smart Specialisation (GS3)

F&FG has continued a successful partnership with the Latrobe Valley Authority (LVA) in delivering projects under the Gippsland Smart Specialisation Strategy (GS3) throughout 2023.

GS3 is a collaborative, evidence-based regional development methodology developed in and widely practised across the European Union. It aims to utilise a region's existing strengths and brings together representatives from four key sectors (government, industry, education/research, and the local community) to provide evidence and direction for the development of new, innovative regional opportunities. Having diversity of experience, representation, focus, and influence allows for robust assessment of new opportunities, and ensures all voices have an opportunity to advocate for their wants and needs.

The themes of circular economy, sustainable emerging commodities and sovereign manufacturing have continued to drive GS3 project work in 2023. Building on these themes, investigation into two innovative new project areas of interest, industrial hemp fibre and vertical farming, commenced at the start of this year.

Industrial hemp fibre (IHF) is one of the oldest, strongest, and most versatile fibre sources in the world, with a myriad

of uses from textiles to building materials. Despite strong international market demand, there is a significant gap in the Australian hemp industry and market for fibre cultivation and processing; only 3% of all hemp cultivated in Australia is used for fibre purposes, with the remainder grown for food or medicinal applications.

IHF cultivation and processing has been identified as a particularly valuable potential opportunity for the Gippsland region due to existing land use, recognised strengths in horticultural production, relative proximity to processing facilities and low opportunity cost compared to other regions.

Vertical farming is a form of Controlled Environment Agriculture (CEA), where plants are grown in vertically stacked beds using an inert growing medium and fed via various systems including hydroponics or aeroponics. Farms can range from the size of a vending machine to a whole building, with versatility in structure to suit the desired product.

Vertical farming (VF) may complement existing agriculture and horticultural production in the region by providing a climate-proof environment for seed growth and supplementing supply during climate challenges (drought, floods, bushfires). There is also the opportunity to use vertical farming technology to

research and grow valuable commodities, including traditional bushfoods, in a controlled environment utilising renewable energy sources for production, such as geothermal energy.

Leading the initial investigation into IHF and VF was Federation University Industry Placement Program (IPP) student Luke Townsend, supervised by Project Manager for Regional Industry Innovation, Elena Nauta. As a third-year Bachelor of Environmental Science student, Luke brought valuable research skills, a passion for sustainability and intelligent insights to the F&FG team.

Luke's initial work with the team involved completing extensive desktop research and stakeholder consultation alongside Elena to understand the potential for IHF and VF at a global, national, and local level, and how this knowledge may translate into opportunities for valuable potential industries in the Gippsland region.

This research and investigation provided the groundwork for the first Entrepreneurial Discovery Process (EDP) workshops held in late May and early June, where 60+ experts from government, industry, education/ research, and community backgrounds joined online and in-person at the Morwell Innovation Centre to discuss

opportunities, barriers and actions required to support the development for each of these potential industries in Gippsland. Both workshops were facilitated by Professor Bruce Wilson from RMIT University, and ultimately asked participants if these new industries were "goers" for Gippsland – the answer for both IHF and vertical farming was a resounding "yes" from all participants.

Building on findings from the first vertical farming workshop, a follow-up session was held in the last quarter of 2023 to discuss the potential for a vertical farming trial in the region. Participants discussed the potential of the forestry and horticultural industries utilising this technology powered by geothermal energy, creating a secure seedling supply, and boosting existing production. Invitations for expressions of interest to join a working group around this opportunity were circulated during November.

In addition to the two exciting new project areas of IHF and vertical farming, investigation into the sustainable emerging commodities of seaweed and insect farming has continued in 2023, with interest growing and opportunities rapidly emerging.

Following on from the promising findings of the Gippsland Seaweed Aquaculture Report completed in 2022 by Deakin University, the Gippsland Seaweed Innovation Network has discussed potential opportunities for seaweed cultivation trials, growing species identified in the report for various applications including food, nutraceuticals, bioenergy, and agriculture.

There is also strong interest and potential future synergies with offshore energy developments in Gippsland. Amazon has recently commissioned one of the largest commercial scale seaweed farms in the world, growing seaweed between offshore wind turbines in the North Sea able to sequester thousands of tonnes of CO₂. Gippsland is in a unique position to potentially lead the scale-up of Australian seaweed cultivation and industry development through innovative cultivation methods such as this. Expressions of interest to join targeted working groups focusing on potential near-shore and offshore seaweed cultivation trials were circulated during November.

Investigation into insect farming has grown and diversified in 2023. Following on from the Gippsland Organic Waste Mapping study completed by Future

Food Systems in late 2022, significant interest in the concept of integrated “bio hubs” has arisen in Gippsland; the hub model enables insect bioconversion technology to sit alongside bioenergy technologies including anaerobic digestion. This arrangement maximises the value obtained by processing organic waste; insects convert much of the waste to high-value protein for animal or aquacultural feed, whilst any leftover waste is put into the anaerobic digester, which becomes biogas and heat energy. The Biomass Innovation Network was established in partnership with the LVA Energy team earlier this year to explore and facilitate the development of these innovative circular economy opportunities in Gippsland, with investigation continuing in 2024.

Finally, the GS3 team are delighted to welcome Amanda Gould, who joins the team as Project Manager – Regional Industry Innovation alongside Elena Nauta. Amanda and Elena will continue lead investigation into industrial hemp fibre, vertical farming, seaweed cultivation and insect farming in 2024. Themes of circular economy, sustainable emerging commodities and sovereign manufacturing will continue to drive GS3 work, with new partners including the ARC Centre for Excellence in Synthetic Biology and the Danish Consulate also working with F&FG to explore potential new opportunities in this space.

Exploring industrial

RESEARCH

Supporting the vegetable industry and its people

The past twelve months have seen a change of hands for the Gippsland VegNET program (AUSVEG), with Food & Fibre Gippsland's respected regional development officer (RDO) Bonnie Dawson resigning her position in June to travel America and Europe. Emily Scott has taken on the RDO role for VegNET Gippsland. With a three-month transition period and first-hand experience working in salad planning and supply across the region, Emily has made a smooth transition into the VegNET RDO role.

Bonnie's final few months as RDO were marked by two major events which she had been instrumental in organising; the Victorian Vegetable Innovation Days (VicVID), and the International Spinach Conference. Both events were resounding successes with over 500 people attending the two-day VicVID event, and over 130 people attending the International Spinach Conference.

VicVID - a collaboration between Stuart Grigg Ag-Hort Consulting, AUSVEG Vic and the two Victorian VegNET projects, and delivered by AUSVEG and Food & Fibre Gippsland - was held at Butler Market Gardens' Catani farm at the end of April. A key feature of the event was the ten seed demonstration sites that

showcased the latest development in vegetable genetics and phenotypic outcomes. In addition to the seed trials, there were six trials that demonstrated some of the latest fertiliser and crop protection products for the industry.

Throughout the year, VegNET Gippsland has continued to make progress towards the key extension focus areas of the five-year Regional Extension Strategy (RES). The RES continues to review and refine activities to reflect the needs and desires of levy payers through the Regional Extension Advisory Group (REAG); event feedback; and one-on-one discussions.



Moving into 2024, the key extension and adoption focus areas of the Gippsland VegNET program are:

1. Water quality and security
2. On-farm biosecurity and integrated pest and disease management
3. Smarter growing
4. Building business capacity and a sustainable workforce

Ongoing funding from the Commonwealth Government's Future Drought Fund through a 'Hub-Hub' project – a collaboration between the Victorian, WA and NT Drought Resilience Hubs - saw the soil moisture monitoring demonstration trial continue throughout 2023 as part of Focus Area 1: Water quality and security. The project brings together local growers and agronomists, Agriculture Victoria's irrigation extension team and horticulture industry development manager, and the West Gippsland Catchment Management Authority, to understand the processes, benefits, and challenges of adopting soil data monitoring in intensive vegetable production. A field day was scheduled for early October, however, it was postponed until November due to the devastating floods experienced by growers across Gippsland.

The flooding saw large areas of cropland go underwater and caused millions of dollars of crop damage and extensive



repairs required for multiple farms. The field day was successfully rescheduled for late November, providing attendees with the opportunity to see a practical demonstration and correlation between the information provided by a soil moisture monitor and what can physically be seen in the soil profile.

VegNET Gippsland has continued to work closely with AUSVEG and other projects to deliver biosecurity and pest and disease management activities as part of Focus Area 2. In March, a Fall Armyworm (FAW) discussion group was held in Lindenow and attended by 10 local growers and agronomists. Following this, VegNET is now working closely with the Queensland Department of Agriculture and Fisheries (QDAF) and Agriculture Victoria to help deliver a FAW Industry Learning Group as part of the VG22006 National fall armyworm innovation system for the Australian vegetable industry's project.

The first of the Victorian FAW Industry Learning Groups was held in Lindenow on September 26th and saw around 12 agronomists and growers attend. The project's principal entomologist, Dr Melina Miles, educated attendees on everything from identification, to spray timings and economic impacts. The event also included a presentation from the AUSVEG biosecurity team on the biosecurity needs of the region. Event feedback forms saw the learning group receive a 90% satisfaction rating from

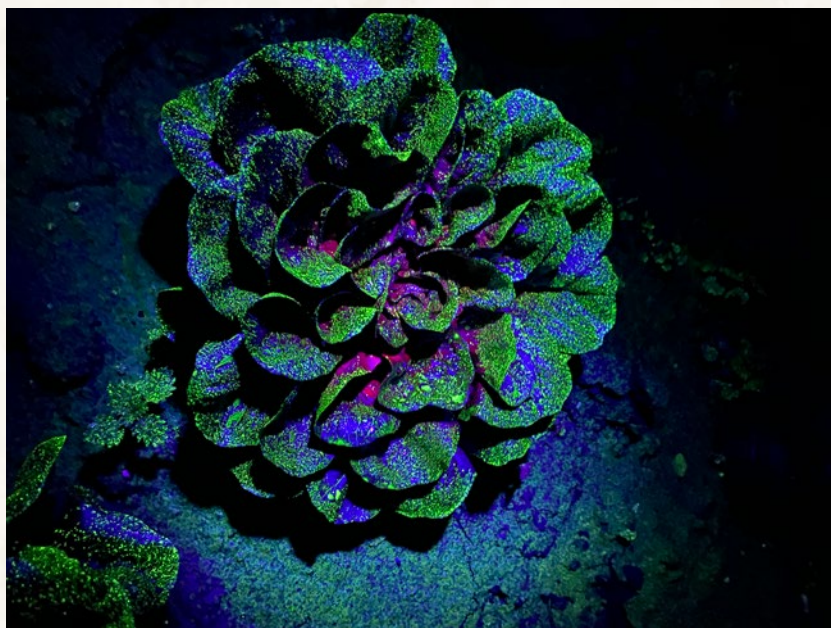
participants, with a follow-up event, including a field walk, scheduled for early next year.

Straddling Focus Areas 1 & 2 was the Syngenta spray demonstration evening held at Bulmer Farms in early May. The event saw over 20 growers and agronomists walking lettuce crops at night to compare spray patterns under UV light. Many attendees commented that the key learning they would take away from the event was the amount of water required for an effective application. With a BBQ dinner cooked by VegNET and Syngenta, and drinks supplied by Elders Bairnsdale, the event was also a successful networking opportunity for all.



Focus Area 3: Smarter Growing, saw some smart thinking by both Bonnie and Emily during their three-month crossover with a successful application to the Hort Innovation Fund resulting in an almost fully funded study tour to Queensland to attend the Gatton AgTech Showcase event scheduled for November. Emily accompanied 10 Gippsland growers and agronomists to the showcase, along with a day touring Lockyer Valley farms and agribusinesses and a networking dinner with other growers from across Queensland. Weeding and drone technologies were some of the key drawcards at the event.

One of the first major projects of new RDO Emily was the 'Winter Warmers Seminar Series' focusing on delivering horticulture-specific seminars based around Focus Area 4: Building Business Capacity and a Sustainable Workforce. The first session of the series was delivered as an initiative of the Informed and Supported Workers (ISW) Program, which was funded by Agriculture Victoria. The initial workshop covered cultural diversity and managing a culturally diverse team. Our ISW program was also managed by Emily. The seminar series' second and third events focused on lean principles in agriculture and leveraging an organisation's people. The events saw a total of 14 separate businesses engage with the series, with multiple participants commenting that they would like to see the sessions continue.



Feedback also showed that participants took away significant levels of new knowledge and skills from these events, with over 75% of participants at each session stating that they would likely change farm practices or advice. Following the conclusion of the series, a case study was published by Emily entitled [Seminar series supports professional development in Gippsland](#). The study reviewed the challenges to, and advantages of, growers spending time working on their business, not just in it.

A case study was then published on the ISW Program, titled [Pilot program supports CaLD workers to settle into Gippsland](#). Emily focused on the challenges in supporting culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) workers to effectively transition into work and life in Gippsland. The ISW Program connected stakeholders working with CaLD communities, shared useful resources, delivered events and training sessions, and used targeted communication approaches to build the cultural competency of CaLD workers and their employers across Gippsland.

Staying in the workforce space, VegNET Gippsland is working with RMIT University to undertake a research project focusing on developing a better understanding of the changing composition of Gippsland's horticultural workforce needs over the next five to



ten years. The project is proposed to consider projected adoption of AgTech, changes in farming techniques, crops, and vegetable pricing and is hoping to inform regional planning, education, and training needs for the industry in Gippsland.

The VegNET project has enabled Emily to participate in professional development and networking opportunities, including attending Hort Connections in Adelaide in June and the Australasia-Pacific Extension Network (APEN) Conference in November which took place in Launceston.

Through Food & Fibre Gippsland Emily was also able to participate in several 'Fearless Leadership' workshops provided by Corrinne Armour. Moving into 2024, Emily will be focusing on a number of longer-term projects including the RMIT workforce research program, ongoing professional development opportunities for the industry, the soil data monitoring project and the FAW Industry Learning Group.

Lastly, the VegNET report would not be complete without mention of the strong bonds we have forged with our overseas partners.

During February, VegNET played host to a group of growers from the USA, providing an opportunity for Gippsland food and fibre enterprises to showcase their operations.

Hailing from the states of Oregon, Idaho and Ohio, the fruit and vegetable growers, industry representatives and horticultural academics visited farms and production facilities in Gippsland and Shepparton, before a final stop at the Melbourne wholesale markets.

The tour was organised by Assoc. Prof. Ed Peachey from the University of Oregon, who previously visited Gippsland prior to the COVID-19 outbreak. Linking in with contacts established during his earlier trip, Assoc. Prof. Peachey's intention was to bring a group of US growers to Gippsland in 2020, only to be postponed by the pandemic. Enabled by VegNET and with the Gippsland leg coordinated by Food & Fibre Gippsland's previous RDO Bonnie Dawson, the US grower visit was eventually able to proceed in February. Over a busy four days, the US delegation met with Gippsland vegetable growers, brewers, seed suppliers, irrigation experts, supply chain innovators and industry stakeholders, as they shared information and production methods relevant to our region.



Workforce employment

Food & Fibre Gippsland's Jobs Victoria Employment Services (JVES) program has had a highly successful year, both achieving and exceeding their workforce milestones. The Connect 2 Employment (C2E) team completed 1020 registrations, 465 employment placements and 252 employment outcomes in the duration of our program, often overcoming external barriers beyond our control.

Clear and achievable targets were set by Amanda Gould for her team in 2022. Our C2E mentors have subsequently taken these goals and turned them into a reality, positioning the program to be successful in gaining an extension until early October 2023. Additionally, we were eligible to tender for the new JVES program that was due to commence the same month. This instilled a profound sense of pride and faith that we had the right team to execute the requirements of the C2E program.

Our Jobs Victoria partnership has been an initiative that helps our local communities support people unable to gain employment, or those at risk of long-term unemployment. We help to alleviate our participants' barriers and limitations to gaining or staying in jobs. We've achieved this through one-on-one mentoring, upskilling in short

courses, provision of personal protective equipment (PPE), or assisting with the purchase of interview clothing. Sometimes our participants have come to us with a lack of confidence and just need someone to help re-instil their purpose. Our team has done this with kindness and diplomacy while acting in the best interest of our organisation, our program partners, our stakeholders, and our participants.

C2E prides itself on collaborative networking and we have particularly enjoyed being asked to join exciting and innovative programs or pilots. We've continued to support those programs we have a long-standing partnership with, enabling us to build a fantastic reputation in our community. C2E have been regarded as a reliable source of support for the Gippsland Learn Local providers and other stakeholders.

We continue to be an integral part of the 'Serving the Valley' hospitality training course, a free program that has provided hands-on experience in food preparation, customer service, front of house engagement and communication. Participants were given one-on-one guidance and support to write and/or update their resumés, as well as the opportunity to engage in a work experience placement at a local café or restaurant.

Last year you all heard about our participation in the Thorpdale long lunch in partnership with Melbourne restaurant Farmer's Daughters. Well, this year took us to Meeniyah for the Garlic Festival. Eight participants of the 'Serving the Valley' program were invited to put their hospitality skills into practice and work for the day, undertaking a range of different tasks which provided practical work experience. It was a successful and highly productive day. Again, in collaboration with Farmer's Daughters and Wine Gippsland, our participants received real-life experience in the service and hospitality industry.

We worked with the Learn Local providers in the east and in the Latrobe Valley, as well as Workforce Australia and our employment facilitator, to develop a drivers' licence pilot program. This initiative aimed to see 10 participants from the east and 10 participants in the Latrobe Valley to successfully gain their drivers' licence. With public transport challenges in Gippsland's regional and rural geographical areas identified as a barrier to employment, this is a huge accomplishment to get the program up and running.

Following six years of successful delivery across our Growing Regional Agribusiness Employment Opportunities



(GRAEP) and Connect 2 Employment (C2E) programs, Food & Fibre Gippsland regrettably informs our valued members, partners, and stakeholders that our Jobs Victoria funded services concluded on the 6th October 2023.

We would like to thank our board and extensive stakeholder network for their unwavering support of our JVES team.



**We strive to
understand
and respond to
the challenges
across our
region.**



Vic Hub - South East Node Lead

The Future Drought Fund activities have been funded by the Commonwealth of Australia through the Victorian Drought Resilience Adoption and Innovation Hub (Vic Hub). Over the last 12 months the activities of the program have been:

Cross Hub (X-Hub) project - Food & Fibre Gippsland, South West WA Drought Hub and North Western WA and NT Drought Hub

The purpose of X-Hub Project 2 is to improve drought resilience in irrigated horticulture. This sector must adapt how it uses existing water allocations and how it adopts efficiency measures to become more resilient to drought and maintain crop production in a drying climate. Project 2 is a cross-sector collaborative approach involving farmers, researchers, service providers and the industry development officers (IDOs) to deliver specific on-farm programs and peer-to-peer learning. Participants will be encouraged to become industry champions, leading grower practice change and mentoring other industry peers within their community. How it will incorporate national FDF objectives: Irrigating efficiently will grow the self-reliance and

performance (productivity and profitability) of the agricultural sector by allowing profitable cropping to continue in periods of drought. Using water resources more efficiently will improve the natural capital of agricultural landscapes for better environmental outcomes. This project has installed a number of demonstration sites using soil moisture measurement technologies (Sentek products); has been represented at the VicVID at Catani; and host a major field day in the Lindenow Valley.



Food & Fibre Gippsland has been working with Latrobe Community Health Service, Bass Coast Shire Council and other agencies to develop a number of train-the-trainer products to support rural mental health professionals in understanding the drought cycle. These products build upon the Commonwealth - Victorian Government program - Gippsland Drought Resilience Plan, and will be delivered to a number of key agencies that are involved with drought planning and preparedness.

The focus of the project is to ensure that key stakeholders understand the communities' requirements when entering periods of drought (as collated through the Gippsland Drought Resilience Plan) and how to develop strategies to ensure that communities are best supported. The project will be training groups across Bass Coast (initial pilot) in November - December 2023.

The 'Green Dams' project has been running for two years and is based at Cape Liptrap. This project aims to (i) improve water harvesting and maintain water quantity and quality in dams in Gippsland as part of drought preparedness; and (ii) develop best practice on how management of vegetation both around and within dams can be enhanced. Three demonstration dams have been installed at the site; a control dam (typical earth bank



paddock dam), an enhanced planting dam with a livestock direct access walkway, and an enhanced planting dam with no livestock access but reticulation of water to drinking troughs. The project is a partnership with the South Gippsland Landcare Network, Bass Coast LGA (REG), West Gippsland Catchment Management Authority (CMA), Agriculture Victoria, Southern Farming Systems, Deakin University and Federation University. A field day has been held with excellent attendance (>50 producers) and we are proactively planning the next meeting for autumn 2024.

Food & Fibre Gippsland has been working with commercial horticulture producers across eastern Gippsland and a commercial company supporting new fertiliser products that utilise lignite, an approach to build soil carbon, retain nitrogen (N) in the soil (reducing greenhouse gas emissions) and build advanced soil water-holding capacity. New fertiliser formulations have been developed that can be used in field trials comparing new products with business as usual (normal practice). We will measure crop production, soil moisture (via advanced sensor networks) and key soil measurements. A recent study sponsored by Future Drought Fund (FDF) funding and led by the South East Node evaluated three



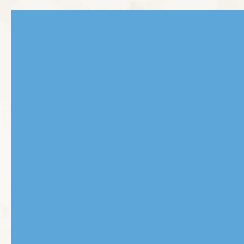
new lignite-based fertilisers. These products build soil organic matter, alter soil water holding capacity through the aggregation of soil peds (thereby increasing irrigation efficiency) and alter N release patterns sparing N inputs. The work was conducted with spinach growers over a single seven-week growing cycle during Q1, 2023. Three lignite mixes were evaluated and one 'business as usual' commercial-controlled (CC) release product. The lignite mixes were lignite urea (LU), lignite organic blend (LO) and lignite base fertiliser (LB). The application rate for CC was 400 kg per ha (N equivalent of 82 kg N/ha). The application rates for LU, LO and LB were N equivalent of 64 kg N/ha, reflecting the research literature suggesting N release and delivery to crops from lignite fertilisers is better synchronised with plant growth.

On a fresh weight basis, the yields of CC (18.9 t/ha), LU (19.1 t/ha), LO (18.8 t/ha) and LB (19.4 t/ha) did not differ substantially. N content of spinach were: 19.56 g/kg DM (CC), 18.42 (LU), 18.77 (LO), 18.84 (LB). The lowering of the N content did not impact on the colour of the spinach between all treatments. This study also included substantial plant and soil chemical analysis.



Hay and silage planning and storage is critical to drought management. Farmers, when entering the drought cycle, must ensure that they minimise purchased-in feed and maximise storage of home-grown forages in the form of hay and silage. Gippsland Agricultural Group and Food & Fibre Gippsland are working together to explain the options available to conserve more feed in good years and how to ensure that the feed stays nutritious for livestock. The project aligns with the recent East Gippsland Shire and Wellington Shire local government area (LGA) producer surveys (the above ranks #2 of the top five impacts on farm productivity). This project aims to improve preparedness for drought on livestock farms in Gippsland and has been running for two years. The initiative currently involves monitoring of conserved silage and hay on-farm over the next six months to appraise feed quality and determine the success of the various silage treatments in longer-term storage. Field days are being held, while information resources to assist fodder conservation practices, both on-farm and by contractors, are under production. The results of this project will be used by farmers in feed planning and decision-making around feed quality leading into and during drought, as well as forage use in containment feeding.

Drought adoption officers have been funded through West Gippsland CMA and Gippsland Ag Group; these staff are working with local producer groups. There are a number of planned activities; for instance, a field day on water and soil health and ute drives to producers.



One of the key issues faced by beef and dairy industries across the region is the onset of green drought, where paddocks look green from a distance, however pasture growth has been substantially reduced by low rainfall. Additionally, grass growth is also being impacted by weed growth or poor soil conditions in paddocks; soil compaction resulting from dry conditions may be another contributing factor. Recent projects funded by the Future Drought Fund provide a better understanding of rainfall projections for regions. Climate Services for Agriculture have an important farmer-focused tool that allows primary producers to receive future rainfall predictions for their farm. This planning tool provides important information so farmers can balance out the risks associated with green drought. Two impacts are easily identified for green drought; the first is a lack of pasture growth during the previous autumn and winter, resulting in low pasture mass in spring. This scenario presents the need for earlier supplementation of stock, as pasture resources decline in the later phase of spring and summer. The second impact is reduced growth when (or if) autumn rains occur; green drought situations can be difficult to manage, with an elevated risk of over-grazing.

Finally, 'Topsoil, do you want more?' seeks to answer the following questions:

1. Can we double the water holding capacity of our topsoil? and
2. Can we extend our topsoil from 150mm deep to 300mm deep?

This project is at an early stage and is being conducted by Gippsland Ag Group in conjunction with Wellington Shire LGA. Soil coring has commenced.



Members and strategic partners

Our members are a valuable part of what we do. We celebrate with them their success, and when they face challenges, we are alongside them. Our members are varied in their scale of operation, from solo operators to extensive processing facilities with over 150 staff.

Food & Fibre Gippsland members are moving with the seasons to grow the freshest food and find the perfect balance of production and feed for their livestock. They're leaning on the tried and tested methods of the past and are open-minded to opportunities that current and future technologies offer to improve sustainability, efficiency, and performance.

During the 22/23 year, we welcomed 24 new members, taking our membership to 114. We hosted four events, attended by 107 members and non-members. The events were a great space for those within our region to meet and discuss new opportunities face-to-face.

Members of the F&FG team participated in several events around the region to represent our organisation and promote our membership and programs; in many cases providing sponsorship and/or in-kind support. Highlights included the Foster Agricultural Show, Meeniyar Garlic Festival, 'Smart Farm Power' field day, Yinnar 'Bee Kind' Community Day,

Lardner Park Steer Trials, Tinamba Food Festival, graduation of Favorite English studies students, and Rural Financial Counselling Service's (RFCS) 'Backbone' magazine launch.



Gippsland accounts for 23% of Australia's dairy milk production, with many milk processing facilities. Several of these opened their doors to us as we hosted visitors through the Trade Council of Denmark in Australia.

Interest has been increasing around how underutilised whey waste may be captured and converted into a value-add in Gippsland. Future visits by delegates will see a sustainability feasibility study conducted, in order to further explore the options and possibilities

Collaboration has continued between members to elevate each other's product lines, particularly through adventurous new combinations of flavours and ingredients.

The Melbourne Food and Wine 'Village Feast' in Thorpdale showcased many of our members and brought visitors from Gippsland and beyond, to experience our quality produce and hospitality.

We have continued to share the stories of our makers, growers, and producers to capture good engagement through social media, while our digital newsletters have shared information with a growing audience.

Local and international awards have recognised our members' products and services, demonstrating continued resilience and resourcefulness despite



changing weather conditions and ongoing impacts following COVID-19. We have connected with newly-opened Gippsland businesses and worked collaboratively with them to identify potential partnerships with existing members.

During the past year, we actively linked members with our former Connect 2 Employment team, who then worked to support these businesses address staffing challenges. Members also took advantage of our website's 'Jobs Board' to promote existing vacancies.

Overall, it has been a steady year of growing our regional presence and establishing greater depth in our connections and relationships.

Be sure to tag us on social media and be part of the ever-expanding food and fibre conversation in Gippsland!

You'll find us on...

- [Instagram](#)
- [Facebook](#)
- [LinkedIn](#)
- [Vimeo](#)





Gippsland Trusted Provenance brand

During 2023, elevation of the [Gippsland Trusted Provenance](#) (GTP) landmark was facilitated through increased awareness. We achieved this through the development of pull-up banners, which have been displayed at food and agriculture events across Gippsland and in Melbourne; enhancing the GTP webpage on the Food & Fibre Gippsland website; showcasing GTP producers in the 2023 **Eat. Drink. Gippsland** guide; speaking about GTP at forums and region-wide meetings; promoting through digital newsletters and social media channels; expanded utilisation of the GTP logo, including a dual-logo version which incorporates the Food & Fibre Gippsland brand; and distributing information at regional and metro shows and expos.

During August, Food & Fibre Gippsland teamed up with the Tinamba Hotel and Gippsland New Energy Conference to produce a promotional video, showcasing the fresh produce of our region and supporting values of sustainability and innovation across the supply chain. Filmed at rural and regional locations in Gippsland, the video brings together a diverse collection of businesses that are synonymous with putting this region on the map as a gourmet food destination. With the enthusiastic cooperation of these producers - many of whom are Food & Fibre Gippsland members - the

paddock-to-plate journey was brought to life during the four-minute video, which was launched during the 2023 Gippsland New Energy Conference in Sale. Hundreds of delegates viewed the presentation, which was also promoted through digital channels. Anecdotally, the short clip was well-received and served to further elevate both the provenance of our region, and the Gippsland producers who are committed to sustainable business practices.



Some of the region's best-loved brands are now using the GTP brandmark to take their products to consumers, including Maffra Cheese Co., Village Dairy, Gippsland Garlic, South Gippsland Dairy, Max Biocare, and Gippsland Jersey - just to name a few.

New Food & Fibre Gippsland members U Goose, Paynesville Pantry and The Berry Dairy have also been enthusiastic adopters, seeing merit in marketing their products as unique to the Gippsland region.

Digital assets are an important tool for bringing the concept to consumers and to this end, we have developed a "welcome pack" for Gippsland Trusted Provenance licensees. In addition to GTP brand use guidelines, brand style guide and a suite of logos, subscribers receive a collection of professionally-designed social media templates which they can use to promote their product.

In 2024, the GTP brandmark will be highly visible as we once again recognise, celebrate and reward excellence in the food and fibre sector, with the return of our region's prestigious Gippsland Food and Fibre Awards. Plus, we'll be continuing to support our members and licensees incorporate the GTP branding and further share the provenance pride.



Marketing and communications

Keeping our members, stakeholders and broader community informed of Food & Fibre Gippsland's work is a key element of the communications and marketing role. Barb Radley joined our team in 2022 and has since successfully ensured that the stories across our region continue to be told in a way that engages, inspires and appries our broad and diverse audience.

Barb has drawn on her background in creative design and photography to help bring these stories to life. We've achieved this through regular social media posts, digital newsletters, and updates on our 'Latest News' page.

Our presence at the Foster Agricultural Show in February enabled us to bring information to the next generation of Gippsland farmers, while introducing our GS3 program to an ever-expanding audience. Prior to the event, we were invited to support the show by exhibiting within the Avenue of Agriculture and sponsoring the unique 'Golden Brick Road' showbags. Colourful flyers were developed for the younger attendees, including one which communicated ways to reduce food waste in the home; another described new and emerging sustainable food sources, such as seaweed and insect farming. The latter proved a source of great interest to the intended audience, who were keen to learn more about the innovative possibilities.

Gippsland Trusted Provenance was another project area we came equipped to talk about. Our promotion on the day included a hamper filled with shelf-stable gourmet Gippsland produce, drawing much curiosity from attendees throughout the event.

During 2023 we were able to round out our collection of industry videos created the previous year, with the production



of a further six 'This is My Job' assets which depicted various roles in the vegetable processing industry. Food & Fibre Gippsland members One Harvest collaborated on the project in April, with a small group of their team members willingly providing an overview of their respective roles.

During May, Barb's attendance at the 'Green Farm Dams' field day at Cape Liptrap enabled a collection of images to be captured, bringing the project to readers on our social media channels and more broadly across Vic Hub communications.

Our social media reach has further expanded in 2023; at year's end, we had 4,248 followers on Facebook, 2,209 on Instagram, and 1,965 on LinkedIn. With the exception of one boosted post to promote a short marketing video developed for the Gippsland Trusted Provenance landmark, we continued to rely on organic engagement in preference to paid advertising.

Our website continues to be a central point for communicating information, sharing resources, and showcasing our members' food and fibre innovation, particularly via our 'Latest News' blog and 'What We Do' webpages. Barb and Emily worked closely to develop a suite of resources for the Informed and Supported Workers Program, which were uploaded to the F&FG website and offered an accessible source of information for both growers and their CaLD workers.



The 10th International Spinach Conference

Five years in the making: In May 2023 the 10th International Spinach Conference was brought to the growers of the Southern Hemisphere for the very first time. Stuart Grigg and Andrew Bulmer of EGVID were the masterminds behind the event coming to Melbourne. Food & Fibre Gippsland's Bonnie Dawson and AUSVEG helped to make the event possible, in collaboration with the generous support of gold sponsor Bayer: Vegetables by Seminis; and partners Hort Innovation and Agriculture Victoria.

The International Spinach Conference and its organisers have been dedicated to the exchange of information across the international spinach community with events taking place all over the world; from China, Spain, America, and the Netherlands, to this year's event downunder. Local organiser, agronomist and event chairperson Stuart Grigg stated that the organising committee were excited about the unique opportunity the conference presented; it was an ideal opportunity for Australia's spinach industry to learn from international partners and researchers, given the limited spinach-specific research undertaken here in Australia. Presenters and delegates travelled from the USA, New Zealand, the Netherlands,

France, Japan, Denmark and Spain to attend this year's conference.

The program featured a jam-packed schedule including presentations and forums hosted at RMIT University in the heart of Melbourne, along with a networking cruise on the Yarra River and a field day to a spinach grower in Bacchus Marsh. The local Gippsland spinach industry remains at the forefront of spinach production in Australia; twelve Gippsland businesses along the supply chain were represented at the conference, including six key spinach growers from the area.





Above: The 10th International Spinach Conference wouldn't have been complete without a group photo of all the delegates and presenters standing in a field of spinach, some of whom were wearing their official blue (not green!) International Spinach Conference shirts with pride.

The conference was officially opened on Monday, May 1st by Hort Innovation's General Manager of Production and Sustainability R&D Anthony Kachenko. Anthony said "the International Spinach Conference showcased innovation from the Australian spinach industry to the world. The event has opened doors for the Australian vegetable industry to collaborate globally to address future research and development opportunities."

Session moderator and highly acclaimed researcher Professor Jim Correll from the University of Arkansas lead the delegation through a diverse range of presentations throughout the morning, from pest and nutrient management in the paddock, to consumer preferences on the supermarket shelf. Michelle Sands from New Zealand shared the challenges of striking the right balance between environmental management and profits, while Ramy Colfer spoke

about the significant organics sector in the USA. Silver sponsors International Fresh Produce Association and One Harvest both piqued the interest of delegates, who presented on food safety and sales performance respectively.

The afternoon session focused more on diseases, with presenters addressing the latest research into Downy Mildew, Stemphylium, Damping Off and White Rust, with multiple presenters emphasising the need for green crop rotations to mitigate disease. Highly respected plant pathologist Dr Lindsey du Toit from Washington State University spoke on disease management in spinach seed crops in the Pacific Northwest USA. The presentations generated a lot of questions and discussion amongst the attendees as diseases in spinach are an ongoing topical issue for many growers.

The discussions turned more social as delegates embraced drinks and tapas included in Bayer's networking cruise on the Yarra River on Monday evening. It was the perfect evening for a cruise with Melbourne looking its best by night for the international visitors, with many heading on to dinner in local restaurants after the cruise.

Tuesday saw the delegation head to a field day at Boratto Farms in Bacchus Marsh where around 150 different seed varieties and treatments were on display from the conference's gold and silver sponsors – BASF/Nunhems, Enza Zaden, Fairbank Seeds, Lefroy Valley, Rijk Zwaan, Syngenta and E.E. Muir & Sons. Boratto Farms generously put on a cooked breakfast and coffee as an informal way of enabling further technical discussion before the end of the conference.

Many thanks to all the presenters and attendees who travelled from around the world to be at the event, and to the organising committee and sponsors who made it all possible, and such a great success.

VegNET 3.0 is a strategic levy investment under the Hort Innovation Vegetable Fund. This project has been funded by Hort Innovation using the vegetable research and development levy and contributions from the Australian Government.





VicVID 2023: Victorian Vegetable Innovation Days

VicVID23 – a collaboration between Stuart Grigg Ag-Hort Consulting, AUSVEG Vic and the two Victorian VegNET projects, delivered by AUSVEG and Food & Fibre Gippsland – was held at Butler Market Gardens' Catani farm at the end of April. With over 500 people through the gates across two days, the organising committee, comprised of Stuart Grigg, Rick Butler, Joy Pedersen, Dale Creed, Danielle Park and Bonnie Dawson, were delighted with the way the event proceeded and the feedback subsequently received.

The event was the result of generous industry support, particularly from major sponsor Elders, and partners Hort Innovation and Agriculture Victoria. It was rewarding to see the contribution of all involved come to fruition.

A key feature of the innovation days were the ten seed demonstration sites that showcased the latest development in vegetable genetics and phenotypic outcomes. Vegetable lines on display included lettuce and baby leaf, brassicas, and spring onions.

In addition to the seed trials, there were six trials that demonstrated some of the latest fertiliser and crop protection products for the industry.

Platinum sponsor Corteva's Nick Koch said that the event gave growers an opportunity to discover how to better manage pests and diseases. Corteva had on display a number of treatments, including a new fungicide, Verpixo, that will be available to the market late 2023.



Above: Spinach Industry Royalty providing a preview to the International Spinach Conference.

L – R: Distinguished Professor Jim Correll, growers Adam Schreurs and Andrew Bulmer, Agronomist and conference lead Stuart Grigg, global spinach coordinator for Rijk Zwaan, Wim in 't Groen, Professor Lindsey du Toit and head of research and development for Pop Vriend, Jan de Wisser.

Fellow platinum sponsor Syngenta teamed up with Fairbank Seeds to showcase the latest in vegetable seeds and chemicals, notably the recently-released Simodis which was showcased to combat diamondback moth in brassicas. According to Syngenta technical services manager, Len Ibbotson, events such as VicVID are few and far between for growers; he noted they provide a fantastic opportunity for industry members to see products on trial side-by-side.

On the Thursday evening, the Elders industry networking event was held in Bunyip, providing the opportunity to bring many in the industry together to share ideas and celebrate. Two awards were presented on the night by event master of ceremonies and comedian Dave O'Neill. Best field display went to Lefroy Valley and best exhibitor went to Boomaroo Nurseries.

Throughout both days, a series of short presentations and demonstrations were delivered across the site, which were curated by the two Victorian VegNET projects. Included were a walk through the trial cover crops led by Dr Kelvin Montagu of Applied Horticulture Research; and an overview of the Gatton Smart Farm project from Ian Layden, QDAF Director Vegetables, Systems and Supply Chains.

Another highlight was a preview of the Tenth International Spinach Conference, which was delivered in Melbourne to 150 delegates the following week. Stuart Grigg and event MC Carolyn Blackman convened the session which provided a taster of some of the content presented at the conference. The Panel included Distinguished Professor Jim Correll of the University of Arkansas, and Professor Lindsey du Toit of Washington State University, who have both long been involved in delivering the Conference to the world's spinach industry and are highly acclaimed plant pathologists for horticulture.

Prof Correll provided an overview of the history of the conference and Prof du Toit provided an overview of global spinach production, where it is grown and why.

The panel also featured global Spinach Coordinator for Rijk Zwaan, Wim in 't Groen, and Spinach Breeder for Pop Vriend, Jan de Wisser, both whom had travelled from the Netherlands. Rounding out the panel were local growers, Andrew Bulmer, and Adam Schreurs, who were able to ground the discussion with real-life perspectives, both from the angle of best practice and business management.

At the following weekend's AUSVEG Vic Awards for Excellence dinner, Chair of AUSVEG Vic, Paul Gazzola, congratulated the Committee on their efforts in bringing together such a valuable event for the industry's growers. "It is a unique event for horticulture as it presents an opportunity for farmers to get off the farm for a day, network with their peers and see what is happening in their industry in once place".



Images, top to bottom:

Photo 1: The ceremonial cutting of the bok choy by Senator Linda White and local industry stalwart Jack Walker marked the official opening of the Victorian Vegetable Innovation Days.

Photo 2: Major sponsor Elders agronomist Connor Steel, judging Lefroy Valley's winning field display.

Photo 3: Dr Kelvin Montagu providing an overview of the cover crop mixes and termination techniques on display.

Following page, L to R: Scott Botten (Agriculture Victoria), Bonnie Dawson, Emily Scott (Food & Fibre Gippsland).





Our board and our team

Our board

BARRY ROGERS **Chair**
BRIAN DAVEY **Deputy Chair**
KYLIE HOLMES **Treasurer**
MICHAEL GROGAN **Board Member**
SIMON JOHNSON **Board Member**
SARA RHODES-WARD **Board Observer (non-voting)**
CHRIS BUCKINGHAM **Board Observer (non-voting)**
BRUCE WESTON **Board Observer (non-voting)**
LAURA MACPHERSON **Board Observer (non-voting)**

Our team

BEN GEBERT **Chief Executive Officer**
BARB RADLEY **Marketing & Communications Manager**
PHOEBE HICKS **Relationship Manager**
EMILY SCOTT **Regional Development Officer - VegNET**
ELENA NAUTA **Project Manager - Regional Industry Innovation**
DR JULIAN HILL **Vic Hub South East Node Lead**
AMBER POTOCHNIK **Office Manager**
AMANDA GOULD **Project Manager - Regional Industry Innovation**
BRODIE ANDERSON **Regional Drought Resilience Officer**

*Board profiles
-click here*

*Team profiles
-click here*



**Food & Fibre
Gippsland**

*Our mission is to lead capacity building,
innovation and knowledge sharing*

www.foodandfibregippsland.com.au