

NEW AGRITECH PROJECT TO SET UP A COMMERCIAL DEMONSTRATION MODEL FOR YEAR ROUND GROWING

The Ministry of Finance and Economic Management (MFEM) is pleased to announce it has awarded a SMART AgriTech Scheme grant to Cook Islands Water Services. The company will use the grant to develop an innovative, year-round growing environment for both commercial vegetable production and as a demonstration and learning space for local growers.

Over the November to March season, the weather limits the range of locally grown vegetables that can be produced, and so our reliance on expensive imported product increases over these months. The Cook Islands Water Services project aims to address this issue by increasing awareness and knowledge of year-round growing environments for commercially viable crops, therefore improving crop yield and reducing our reliance on imports.



Cook Islands Water Services' Kees Van Wijk has initiated this project to help give Rarotonga communities access to fresh, affordable local produce all through the year.

"The Agritech grant will enable us to set up a specialised greenhouse. Half of the greenhouse will be used by established grower to produce commercially viable crops year-round for supply to the local market. The other half, will be used as a demonstration unit where current, new and emerging growers can see how the system works and gain technical advice," he says.

The new greenhouse is different to the standard greenhouses and shade houses currently found in Rarotonga. It has been designed specifically for hot and humid climates, with a chimney structure with fixed roof and side vents that creates a greenhouse with a lower inside temperature. This enables a wider range of crops to be grown, even during the humid months of the cyclone season. The greenhouse structure is fully enclosed, protecting crops from rain and insects, and is made from high-grade galvanised steel suitable to withstand pressure from high winds.

Cook Islands Water Services will set up the demonstration unit for local growers to vis-

it and seek technical advice on. Growers will be able to see and learn about new horticultural infrastructure, how different growing mediums can be used, and how the environmental impact of commercial growing can be reduced by recirculating nutrients.

Perhaps the most exciting aspect of this hybrid commercial and learning business model is that it also aims to attract new generation of younger growers into horticulture as a career. This is essential for the future growth and sustainability of the agricultural sector as a producer of fresh, healthy food for our local communities.

