

SMART AGRITECH SCHEME

TOWARDS A SMARTER, MORE EFFICIENT AND PROFITABLE AGRICULTURAL SECTOR

Young entrepreneur's SMART idea wins AgriTech grant

The Ministry of Finance and Economic Management (MFEM) is pleased to announce it has approved SMART AgriTech Scheme funding to enable young Cook Islands entrepreneur Piri Maa of Maa Veges to establish a hydroponics greenhouse to grow local vegetable crops for year-round supply to the local market. There are many difficulties in growing vegetable crops outdoors in Rarotonga, including the climatic conditions and pests, but local experiments in growing crops indoors have produced good results. Maa Veges will use a solar-powered drip fertigation hydroponic system to maximise crop production in their new greenhouse.

Piri developed his idea back in 2016, after he participated in a hydroponics workshop with New Zealand expert Simon Lennard from Suntec International Hydroponics, looking at how hydroponics can improve the capacity of Cook Islands agriculture. Piri's job in bioscurity made him very aware of the opportunity to produce more vegetables locally, and he carried out market research to confirm local buyers are interested before firming up his business plans.

"I have seen how imported produce has in-

creased in price due to Covid-19, and I know this project will benefit our local community by making more fresh, local crops available all year round. I did the research to confirm buyers are interested, but the cost of setting up for hydroponics was too high for me to manage on my own. I'm very grateful for the SMART Agritech funding to make my business plan possible," says Piri.

With seven years' experience in growing a variety of vegetable crops under his belt, Piri is well-placed to succeed in his new venture. He has already started a mini trial for coloured capsicum and will use the new smart farming system to expand these trials to include different varieties of capsicums. The trials will identify which varieties of coloured capsicum are best suited for our climate to ensure all year round supply.

While the hydroponic system is being developed, Maa Veges will work on reconditioning the soil on their land-based system using locally available natural fertilisers. This process will be maintained over the long term to support the business's ability to provide a continuous supply of vegetables including but not limited to cucumbers, broccoli and cauliflower. In the longer term, Piri

hopes Maa Veges will be able to expand their smart farming system in Rarotonga and potentially look at expansion to the outer islands in future.

Agritech grants support investment in smart, productivity-enhancing agritech and equipment to improve the commercial viability of agricultural businesses and the economic sustainability of the agricultural sector. Through the grants, Government aims to foster innovation by encouraging the development and adoption of more innovative and productive technologies across the agricultural supply chain.

