

# PCA Conference Highlights: 28–31 March 2022

Melinda Simpson, Berry Industry Development Officer, NSW DPI

The 2022 PCA Conference was held at the Pacific Bay Resort in what would have traditionally been a sunny, sub-tropical climate. However, the conference coincided with one of the wettest periods of weather ever known, providing the PCA and ASN events with a unique set of challenges.

The PCA event started to swing into action in the evening with a welcome function kindly sponsored by Haifa fertilisers. This was probably one of the first face-to-face events that the industry had attended 'en masse' in over two years and it was great to see everyone on that basis. The weather started to get even worse with large amounts of heavy rain falling. The wind was such that flights from Sydney had trouble landing at Coffs Harbour; one flight apparently had three landing attempts before touching down!

The conference commenced on Tuesday 29 March with a welcome to country and opening ceremony, followed by Tristan Kitchener providing an in-depth viewpoint on retailing and opportunities for producers. Tristan presented about how protected cropping products can be better differentiated in a crowded market and how we engage the consumer better in selling the advantages of how protected cropping produce is grown on a lighter environmental footprint. The opening session also featured students from several universities presenting their R&D projects giving a great insight into their work.

Phil Thomas and Gal Winter (University of New England) presented on early results from their tomato rhizobiome trials. Root microbiology is known to be a vital factor in plant health – good and bad – when crops are grown in soils, but far less attention has been paid to root microbiology in hydroponically grown plants. This project focuses on the root microbiome of hydroponic tomato plants, to establish what's there, how it is

affected by plant management, and how it in turn contributes to plant health and productivity. Learnings from this research can be transferred to berries as it provides a greater understanding of the role of the plant microbiome in soilless horticulture and may suggest new methods to improve yield and mitigate the risk of heat and water stress. In the future, probiotics may play an important role in improving general crop health and further reducing the use of chemicals and fungicides.

Terry Lin (Western Sydney University), presented on the long-term performance of several cooling technologies and greenhouses, including characterising the energy-saving potential of 'Smart Glass', a diffuse glass fitted with ULR-80 film which permits transmission of 85% of photosynthetically-active light and blocks heat-generating radiation for greenhouses. This research found that 'Smart Glass' reduced cooling energy use by 4.4% and fertigation demand by 29% in cooler months, and reduced cooling energy use by 4.4% and fertigation demand by 18% in warmer months. The 'Smart Glass' did not significantly affect ventilation or heating energy use, but substantially reduced fruit yield.

There was a severe storm warning at the start of the Wednesday session. The wind was so strong that the organisers had to temporarily close access to the trade area as the actual structure was under threat, but luckily the wind receded by lunch time. However, the relentless rain had done its damage and the planned farm tours on Thursday had to be cancelled with access roads to farms now under water.





One of the busy trade halls. Photo credit: PCA

Conference speaker Tristan Kitchener. Photo credit: PCA





An update on the progress of the 'National map of protected cropping systems' project was provided by Craig Sheppard and Andrew Robson both from the University of New England at the Wednesday session. The project team have published the first draft mapping of protected cropping systems (PCS) for the Adelaide and Tasmanian growing regions and made it available for peer review via the Industry Engagement Web Application (IEWA). They have begun the process of draft mapping Western Australian growing regions, and scheduled field validations for early April. The team has also progressed the development of an automated image analysis approach for rapid detection of protected cropping systems, with the model being applied to high-resolution aerial imagery over Southeast Queensland. The map will assist the Protected Cropping Industry to prepare for biosecurity incursions and coordination of on-ground surveillance, and for quantifying the impacts following a natural disaster event. Identifying the location of specific farming systems also provides essential information around value-chains, traceability, transport and market accessibility.

Priva provided an update on new technology coming through such as their Crop Cycle Manager. This is a planning tool that allows the creation of strategies for the lifecycle of the crop. It allows users to create and enter set recipes for different crops from start to end. Priva are also introducing an Application Programming Interface (API), a software intermediary that allows two applications to talk to each other. This means that data can be shared between different systems and owners can amend or edit permissions and access, and no re-engineering or access to the local system is necessary.

The general feeling was that the conference as a whole was a huge success, and it was so good to be back to face-to-face conversations and meetings. A huge round of applause needs to go to the ASN team for handling an ever-changing situation, as well as to PCA Chair Matt Plunkett, event Chair Emily Rigby and the PCA team for running another fantastic event.

And now the attention turns to PCA 2023 to be hosted in Brisbane – stay tuned for details!



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We know that no day  
is the same.**

PCA has more than 40 years of experience providing relevant and practical services to businesses in the protected cropping industry.

As the peak representative industry body, we strive to keep our growers profitable and to provide allied trade and other industry partners with opportunities to grow with the industry.

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