

Funding plugs big future for Australia's strawberry industry

A commercial nursery in the Southern Downs is paving the way for Australia's strawberry industry after developing a new way to grow strawberries. Spring Creek Seedlings have commercialised an innovative, extremely water efficient and soilless plug plant system that is cost competitive against field grown plant material – a project expected to create up to 20 regional jobs.

Owners Peter and Lesley Burnell spent the past 15 years developing the plug plant production system and adapting the process to suit Australia's conditions. "I travelled through Europe in 2006 to research the strawberry industry and the development of the plug plant process further, with the aim of developing the system for production of commercial plant material in Australia," Mr Burnell said. Spring Creek Seedlings is one of 14 businesses to receive a Rural Economic Development (RED) Grant of up to \$250,000 which will be used to fast track their production facility to keep up with industry demand for strawberry plug plants. "We currently produce 2.5 million plug plants per season, are the only commercial producers based in Queensland and are one of the larger producers of plug plants in Australia," Mr Burnell said. "The RED Grant will enable Spring Creek Seedlings to fast track the expansion of our production facility and scale up production to a 7.5 million plant facility."

Strawberry plug plants are grown on a tabletop structure, fed through an innovative and highly efficient hydroponic system. "A curtain of 'daughter' plants develops during the growing season which are harvested for processing, with material used for propagation into individual cells," Mr Burnell said. "The resulting product is a healthy strawberry plant with its own strong root system in an individual cell." Despite being more expensive, Mr Burnell says growers are seeing greater returns through fruit production.

"Plug plants are more expensive to buy, compared to bare rooted runner plants, although from producers' feedback are now seeing the benefit in plug plants with greater returns provided through initiating earlier fruit production, greater productivity through the season and for some varieties, larger fruit," he said.

Mr Burnell says the expansion of their production facility will create an opportunity for the strawberry industry to explore international markets.

"The expansion of the strawberry plug plant facility will be a game changer for the strawberry industry in Queensland," he said.

"It has the potential to assist with the future expansion of export markets through improved efficiencies in plant establishment and greater returns per plant through the production cycle."

"Horticulture plays a significant role in the local economy of the Southern Downs, through direct employment, supporting local businesses and ongoing community benefit through driving economic growth in the region," he said. "The strawberry industry is well known for the significant labour requirements across the supply chain from the nursery, to planting, managing plants through to production and of course picking of fruit," Mr Burnell said.

The Rural Economic Development (RED) Grants program offers emerging projects up to \$250,000 in co-contributions to build industry and grow employment opportunities across the agricultural sector. The \$10 million grants program provides for three funding rounds over a three-year period ending 2021.

A total of 14 businesses have received \$3.34 million under the second round of funding for the RED Grants program. Overall, these 14 projects are expected to create more than 600 jobs across the agricultural sector in regional Queensland.

The Queensland Rural and Industry Development Authority (QRIDA) administer the RED Grant scheme on behalf of the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries. For more information about the RED Grant scheme visit www.qrida.qld.gov.au



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