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Peter Ivankovich

The 2006 season saw a marked improvement on last year's season and appears to have renewed excitement across the onion industry and among growers. We did not experience a worldwide glut of onions as was the case in 2005. Produce levels across the US market declined from 2005 and exports improved for the Tasmanian and New Zealand markets, meaning that the market on the Australian mainland was not affected. Operating returns and margins improved for all Australian onion growers.

Also, a mild onion testing laboratory commenced and coinciding with this, supermarkets have expressed interest and commitment to the development of a sweet onion market on the proviso that mildness can be certified. In summary, the Australian onion industry has performed well in 2006, with new opportunities on the horizon.

Onion conference

The Australian Vegetable Industry Conference 2006 was held in May in Brisbane. Onions Australia ran an industry-specific program alongside general interest vegetable presentations. The event gave the opportunity for Onions Australia to expose a wider audience to onion growing and its challenges.

Onion growers were given access to a range of different and interesting speakers such as Dr Bill Randle, University of Georgia, who delivered the onion program's keynote address at a mild onion workshop chaired by IAC chair Trevor Twigden.

The key message from Dr Randle regarding the mild onion market in Australia is to learn from the experiences of the US to ensure that we get things right in Australia. For example, as an industry we need to ensure that certification and acceptable ratings for pyruvic acid levels are in place from the outset.

In summary, the joint venture with Ausveg for the onion conference was well received and another joint conference is planned for 2007 in Sydney. It is anticipated that subsequent conferences will be biannual.

Onion industry strategic plan 2006–2016

In order to continue to access matched R&D funds through Horticulture Australia Limited (HAL), the Onions Australia Executive Committee has been busy compiling the draft Onion Industry Strategic Plan 2006–2016.

To date, a one-day workshop was held in Melbourne to commence the process, and a follow-up workshop is planned for November in Tasmania. Once the draft strategic plan is finalised, we will forward the document to government for approval of matched funds.

Research

HAL is continuing to administer research and development for the industry in the areas of onion white rot, onion stunting and biosecurity. In addition, research results in the area of onions and health illustrates that there is a link between onion consumption and reduced cholesterol and fatty acids in the blood.

So, now that we have the research to prove 'onions are good for you', it is important for the industry to leverage this research in order to promote the benefits of onion consumption to consumers. We have highlighted both 'increasing consumption' and 'increasing consumer awareness of the health benefits of onions' as key areas of focus for our draft Onion Industry Strategic Plan—here is a way to begin to do those things.

Sincere thanks

The management committee over the last year has achieved a considerable amount including the conducting of the conference and our progress towards an onion industry strategic plan. I'd like to specially thank Joanne Thomas-Ward, our executive officer, for her tremendous support and contribution in organising our regular meetings, correspondence and other matters.

Thanks also to all executive committee volunteers for their efforts and contributions over the past year.

Peter Ivankovich
Chairman