

Global recognition for premium KI seed crop

By LOUISE McBRIDE

SOUTH Australia is the nation's largest potato growing region, producing 22,000 tonnes of certified seed each year. With its three main seed stock regions – Kangaroo Island, the Mallee and the South East – the state enjoys a relatively disease-free status and booming production. But this lucrative multi-million dollar industry is under threat from free trade agreements putting pressure on authorities to open the gates to potatoes from New Zealand – an industry plagued by diseases such as zebra chip – which could potentially devastate Australia's industry.

As the potential disease threat hangs over their heads, the State's seed producers are getting on with the job and pushing the "pristine, clean green image" of SA's seed stock, and proving why their industry is so well-regarded throughout the country.

Recently, SA's industry was given a boost with accredited mini tuber producer Solan (SA) Pty Ltd, Waikerie, increasing output by nearly 40 per cent on the back of improvement and expansion of

FAST FACTS

- SA produces about 30pc of nation's seed requirements
- Ten certified seed growers in SA
- SA nation's largest potato producer generating \$206m annually at farm gate

its breeding and growing facilities.

Solan director Ken Morley said the upgrading of facilities had provided a secure source of premium, disease-free early-generation plant material for the potato industry.

The new nursery complex, including a tissue culture laboratory, was built with a State government grant of \$106,500 from the *Riverland Sustainable Futures Fund*.

Mr Morley said the company had employed two extra staff members – a new nursery worker and a new specialist position in the tissue culture laboratory - since project completion.

"We are one of only seven accredited seed potato producers in Australia, and this expansion has given us greater opportunities to improve efficiency, plant health and quality and to promote our premium product in South

Australia, and also nationally and internationally," he said.

Chief executive officer of Potatoes South Australia Incorporated Robbie Davis said the State's industry is renowned for its premium quality.

"This further investment at the start of the value chain will ensure that the industry continues to set the benchmark domestically and globally," she said.

"The seed sector is a critical link, and currently South Australia produces about a third of the nation's seed requirements.

"The Solan expansion will enable the company to meet increasing demand for its product and is an example of the level of innovation, investment and entrepreneurship in the South Australian industry."

And across the waters in Kangaroo Island, this entrepreneurial spirit is aptly demonstrated.

Seed potatoes have been an industry on KI for 20 years and the region's six growers are grouped near each other in the high rainfall country near Pardana.

Kangaroo Island farmer James Wandel has been in the potato seed growing business for 10



▲ James Wandel and his wife Marnie, Pardana, Kangaroo Island, have been growing seed potatoes for 10 years as a way to intensify production on his farm land. The KI potato industry has a clean, green and pristine image.

years. He also represents the seed sector as a board member of Potatoes South Australia Incorporated.

He said the relatively new industry was attracting a younger group of farmers who were willing to embrace new ideas, take risks and expand the industry.

Mr Wandel diversified his sheep and cattle enterprise as a way to intensify production on his land. He has dedicated 100 hectares of 1200ha of owned and leased land to potato seed stock, and this small proportion generates 85pc of his business income.

"It is a very labour intensive, high value, low area crop," he said. A six year rotation is needed for the crop, so he needs 600ha to grow low generation certified seed.

He harvests 40 tonne/ha and expects to harvest 4000 tonnes of seed this year, keeping 500-600t to plant next year.

"On my farm alone, potatoes support the equivalent of 10-12 full time employees," he said.

As a relatively new growing region, KI is blessed with a near disease-free status and enjoys a stellar reputation of a clean green environment.

"When we started there was not a traditional potato industry here, so we began with clean soils. There are no commercial growers to be a potential source of disease," he said.

"KI is a quarantined growing area and only mini-tubers grown in glass houses from tissue culture are able to be brought in, to ensure we maintain our disease-free stock."

Potatoes are grown for three to four months and then sold to mainland growers, who grow commercial crops to meet the growing demand for potatoes - the most widely eaten vegetable in the country.

Potatoes are also the largest horticultural crop in terms of volume and contribution to national Gross Domestic Product.

"Mainland growers come to KI to get disease-free stock, which ensures a better return for their

commercial crop," Mr Wandel said.

The industry relies on irrigation and the potatoes are planted in spring and harvested in the autumn.

Mr Wandel grows a wide range of varieties - between 30-40 - with the two main ones being Almera and Carisma, followed by Mozart and Sifra.

Most new varieties for breeding stock are brought over from Europe.

As seed stock growers are contracted to grow certain varieties they are guaranteed a market for their produce. On the reverse side, if markets rise, they are locked into a price.

Mr Wandel supplies mainly SA growers, but also some from Queensland, New South Wales, and Victoria.

Limited supplies of water and the difficulty of getting approval for new water infrastructure, such as dams, are limiting factors for the region, as well as the costs of developing ordinary farming land to irrigated land with centre pivots.

And for Mr Wandel, so is rock picking to rid the paddocks of stones.

The key concern across the industry is its potential devastation if Zebra Chip is introduced with imported potatoes.

"By world standards, we are an incredibly 'clean' country, not just with potatoes, but with all agricultural product," Mr Wandel said.

"Biosecurity is our biggest concern, and we need to make sure we do not import exotic pests and diseases."

While growing is a challenging business, seed potatoes have been good for Mr Wandel and his family.

"Potatoes are a dusty, dirty business," he said.

"It is high capital and labour intensive, but it is a challenge I enjoy and the rewards are there.

"Growing potato seed stock has given me the opportunity and cash flow to develop my land to the next stage."

Cleanliness island advantage

KANGAROO Island potato growers Steven Childs and Rodney Lade (pictured) say the Island industry's main strength is cleanliness of the seed.

The business partners in Island Horticulture combined resources four years ago, utilising Rodney's 11 years of potato knowledge and Steven's water supply.

Most of their product goes to fresh market commercial growers with 50 per cent going to the Mallee, 20pc to the Adelaide Plains, 20pc to Victoria and 10pc to Queensland.

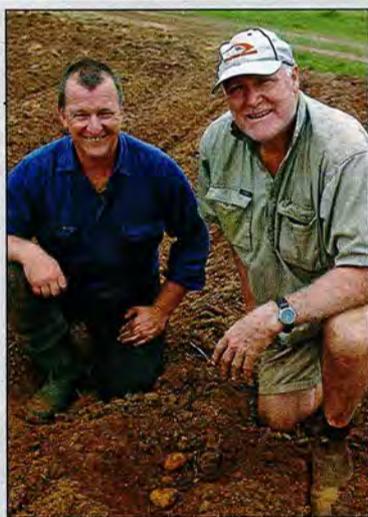
Steven said KI produced about

7000 tonnes of seed potatoes last year, and the relatively new industry has created up to 50 jobs.

Freight costs are an extra burden for the Island's potato seed growers, and Steven said new government policies have restricted the ability to development new dams.

"Freight cost is such a big issue," he said.

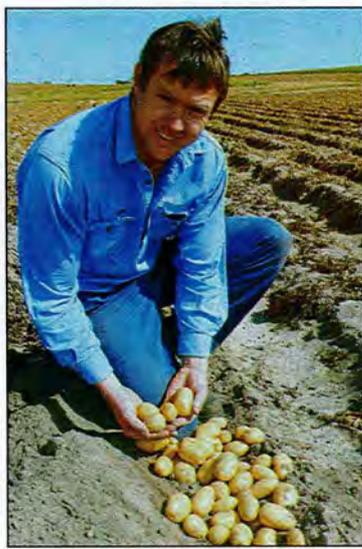
"It costs more to shift a truck from Adelaide to KI than from Tasmania to Melbourne because we can't access any freight subsidies, which is something we have been promoting for KI primary industries



▲ Steven Childs with his business partner, Rodney Lade.

FRONT PAGE:

Hot industry challenge for Mallee growers



THE Mallee is the State's potato hub with sandy soils, underground water and a favourable climate.

Lameroo seed potato grower Ben Warner (pictured) has been growing in the Mallee for four years and farms with wife Lisa and father Gordon.

Previously the family grew seed potatoes on Kangaroo Island, and while the climate change has taken a little bit of getting used to, he says things are going well.

In the Mallee's growing region he is close to other commercial growers, which reduces costs.

He said the biggest challenge facing the region is disease, in particular Potato Virus Y, which is carried by insects and

discolours the flesh of the potatoes.

"You can spray all you like but if the virus gets in, spraying can't fix it," he said.

"The best way to is to have clean seed to plant at the start."

He shares the view held across the industry that there is no need to bring fresh potatoes in from New Zealand that increase the risk of introducing zebra chip and other pests and diseases.

The horticulture industry is largely dependent on a transient workforce.

Ben's business relies on backpacker labour. "You never know what you are going to get," he said, "but most are hard workers, and hiring casual labour during peak season helps keep costs down."