



Media release

Minister for Innovation and Tourism Industry Development
and Minister for the Commonwealth Games
The Honourable Kate Jones

Queensland AgTech technology targets drought resistance

A Queensland startup that's developed plant-breeding technology that could make many of the world's crops drought and virus resistant has received backing from the Palaszczuk Government to rapidly progress its technology to export overseas.

Nexgen Plants recently received approval by US government regulators for its salt-tolerant rice variety which is paving the way for the University of Queensland startup to focus on establishing commercial deals in the huge US market.

The company successfully completed projects with Syngenta, a global food and beverage producer and one of the world's largest seed businesses.

Nexgen plans to use government funds to expand its partnerships to fast-track the development of non-genetically modified crops with new production, consumer and disease resistance traits.

Innovation Minister Kate Jones said the terrible plight of Australian farmers battling the drought was a timely reminder of the importance of the work of companies like Nexgen in Queensland's burgeoning AgTech sector.

"The drought is causing major problems for our farmers at the moment – we have a strong interest in investing in the work that Nexgen is doing to develop crops that are drought-resistant," she said.

"Crop losses caused by environmental stress like drought and salinity or viruses are a multi-billion-dollar global problem.

"The technology developed by this innovative Queensland company provides a potential solution for farmers to improve crop yields and productivity.

"Nexgen's work also has great commercial potential. They'll soon be looking at exporting their work overseas which will help them to scale-up and employ more staff here in Queensland.

"We're committed to investing in innovative local companies to create the jobs of the future in this state – that's why the government is investing more than half-a-billion dollars in Advance Queensland to diversify our economy."

Agricultural Industry Development Minister Mark Furner said Queensland was leading the world when it comes to AgTech.

"Queensland farmers are doing it tough but it's great to think a local company could have the key to tackling this problem in the future," he said.

"Nexgen Plants has been taking bold steps forward since 2009, when Professor Peer Schenk led a team of University of Queensland researchers in developing the technology and worked with UniQuest to attract venture capital which led to the startup company.

"Along the way, we've continually worked with Nexgen to back this technology. We helped to fund the research through a \$223,000 Ignite Ideas grant and sent the company to Tel Aviv in 2017 as part of an Advance Queensland AgTech delegation."

Mr Furner said Nexgen Plants also recently received funding through the Advance Queensland Business Development Fund and founding shareholders Yuuwa Capital LP and Uniseed.

Nexgen Plants Director Brian Ruddle said the key to the firm's technology was that it did not add any foreign DNA to a plant but was able to manipulate a plant's existing genetics to add in traits such as virus resistance and drought resistance. This approach results in products that replicate traditional breeding outcomes.

"We're just replicating the process of natural breeding, but doing it in a way that is quicker and more targeted," Mr Ruddle said.

"For instance, we can work out the genetic sequence that gives corn its salt tolerance, and then develop that same sequence in tomato.

"Jumping that hurdle of US approval has allowed us to take the next step, which is to engage with plant breeders to identify which traits are of interest and working on adding those traits into their crops."

Nexgen Plants has so far worked with tomatoes, potatoes, sorghum and rice and is now expanding the program into a range of other crops.

Nexgen Plants' technologies can prevent crop viruses from wiping out the food supplies and crop-derived incomes of millions of people around the world. An important focus of its work is on salt-tolerant and disease-resistant crops, traits that will improve outcomes during drought.

Yuuwa Capital Investment Director Liddy McCall said Nexgen Plants represented a globally competitive innovation and ongoing support would position Nexgen Plants as an industry leader internationally.

Uniseed Investment Manager John Kurek said Nexgen Plants was a great example of the successful commercialisation of a local technology that had the potential for enormous social impact, both in Australia and around the world.

"Nexgen Plants illustrates the depth of Australian research and will support improvements in agricultural productivity in a changing environment," Mr Kurek said.

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