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HE KAI KEI AKU RINGARINGA

The New Zealand horticulture industry is worth in excess of \$2.1 billion annually¹. Within the wider horticulture industry there are a number of sectors which exist independently whilst contributing to the industry as a whole. The key sectors are: fruit production, cut-flower production, nursery production, amenity horticulture, organic production and vegetable production. Maori contribute to all sectors to some extent however it is the vegetable sector estimated to be worth over \$520million annually² to which this presentation will discuss.

Maori are horticulturists. We know this through our whakapapa which identifies the fact right at the very origins of our people; the sons of Papatuanuku and Ranginui included Rongo-ma-Tane and Haumie-tiketike, manifestations and guardians of the cultivated and uncultivated crops respectively. Our history recalls the importance of key crops during the periods of migration to Aotearoa; taro, aute, uwhi, hue and kumara. Prior to the arrival of Europeans we were subsistence horticulturists' dependant on the success of these crops for matters of survival, hospitality and health. Subsequent to the colonisation of Aotearoa, Maori became key players in the production and marketing of horticultural crops – primarily vegetables but not exclusively – to the new settlements. In the mid Nineteenth Century we – Maori – were the key suppliers of fresh produce to burgeoning settlements such as Auckland and Nelson. We had the skills and resources to manage this but since that time our presence in horticulture/vegetable production within Aotearoa/New Zealand has diminished to the point where vegetable production on a commercial scale is somewhat rare for Maori.

What has changed? Certainly the relationship to the whenua is a key factor. The defence of land, the loss of land, the move to agriculture and pastoralism rather than

¹Hortresearch, 2003: NZ Horticulture Facts & Figures, 2002

² ibid.

horticulture and the urbanisation of Maori in general, are primary factors. We cannot change this but we can learn from this and take our experience harnessed over recent centuries to make a return to an economic relationship with the whenua through horticulture. In particular we can return to the production of kai, of vegetable crops and be participants in the vegetable sector as a whole. 'He kai kei aku ringaringa', a whakatauki we use in Taranaki states 'I can grow food with my own hands' – we know this, we just need to facilitate Maori moving into the 21st Century as vegetable producers.

In 1999 a project was initiated at Massey University whereby varieties of taewa [*Taranaki or Te Tai Hauauru*] or Maori potato (also known regionally as riwai, peruperu, mahetau or parareka) were grown as a seed bank. Seed tubers were given from a range of sources and grown on a single site using both traditional and modern inputs. The subsequent seed harvested was then given to interested Maori to grow. These groups ranged from marae to whanau trusts and individuals and in most cases they were returning to horticulture as a land use rather than building on a current horticultural activity.

The project grew and took on a life of its own. More and more groups wanted to grow taewa and other 'indigenous' vegetable crops. Today in 2004 we still grow and disperse taewa from the same project but it has grown to also include kaanga – the old varieties of corn – hue and kamokamo as key crops. The interest and support from the wider Maori community (and pakeha community), and media continues to be amazing and very positive.

Putting aside the actual production of crops, we came to realise that as a collective of Maori vegetable growers from Kaitaia to Bluff, Maori did not have a structure to participate at a national level in the production sector nor to facilitate interaction between growers, often isolated from other growers throughout the country. Subsequently, in 2001/2002 we started to hold regular hui to bring Maori vegetable growers together and to look to the future with these crops and others. Representatives of the education, horticulture and vegetable sectors were invited to speak to these hui and to date we have had over 10 hui throughout the country focussing on the original project and the future of Maori in the vegetable industry.

These hui also included workshops concerning various crops and showcasing visits to Maori production units.

The reality that Maori needed a national identity as vegetable producers became apparent for a number of reasons including:

- The need for a Maori presence in existing sector interests such as Vegfed, MAF and training & research institutions – there is a need to participate in, rather than compete with, such structures
- The need for a structure which could participate in the sector and also provide for tikanga, matauranga Maori and other components of the modern Te Ao Maori
- The desire for a forum to bring Maori with common interests in whenua and vegetable production together to both support and learn from each other
- The desire to facilitate the return of our future generations to a relationship with the whenua through vegetable and crop production
- The need for a national entity which could purchase and disseminate research and development for, and on behalf of, Maori.
- The need for a strategy which ensures better mechanisms for Maori investment in the vegetable sector and, investment in Maori in the same sector.

Over the last 6 months a core collective of Maori vegetable producers have taken the needs in hand and established a representative body which has recently been approved by the Inland Revenue Department and registered as an incorporated society. The new body will be known as Tahuri Whenua Inc. Soc. – in simple terms, returning to the land, Tahuri Whenua. While it has been established to represent the Maori interest in the vegetable sector, it is also broad enough to consider related matters such as traditional and non-traditional production systems, markets, indigenous labels and research needs. Thus far there has been total support from the growers involved and nothing but positive inputs to each of the hui that has been held.



Tahuri Whenua Hui, Wai-o-Turi marae, Patea – 8 May 2004.

An interim board – including a kaumatua body – has been established and Tahuri Whenua Inc. Soc now have a full board duly elected at their inaugural AGM and the wheels put in motion to firmly and permanently establish the Maori presence in the industry. The kaumatua have, and will ensure we do not compromise our tikanga along the way.

The taewa project introduced earlier as the catalyst for this roopu has moved towards research inputs to improve factors related to this crop. Several students from the university have undertaken small projects related to the crop agronomy. In 2003 we were successful in securing funding from FRST (Foundation for Research, Science & Technology) to work with Crop & Food Research in eliminating viruses latent in the seed tubers. This research is progressing over a two year period. Recently we have also secured further funding for the development of processed products from taewa through the Riddet Research Centre over the next two years, thus targeting a more secure market for producers. More research applications are in the pipeline for both taewa and other vegetable crops by this Maori grower collective. The collective will become both the manager and beneficiary of these projects and we expect to be key participants in the research sector in order to create a leading edge for our growers in an established vegetable sector. It is not our intention to compete against the existing

industry, rather we want to participate on an equal standing with a view to sustained growth in Maori economic development through vegetable production and better utility of the remaining land resource under Maori management.

The process of establishment of a national Maori body is usually fraught with difficulties, not least the external politics which affect our lives. We have been very fortunate in being able to focus on the needs of Maori in a single sector and develop a mechanism based in tikanga which will work for Maori. We have also been very fortunate at this point in having a positive response from the existing entities in the sector to Maori development and future relationships. The key has been the passion and clear vision by all the growers involved and the best use of government and private or industry processes to assist this vision. Perhaps in the near future other sectors in the horticulture industry will follow this model.

Kia ora ano tatou katoa.