

DECEMBER 2020



# Growing Undercover

PROTECTED CROPPING AUSTRALIA MONTHLY NEWSLETTER

## A message from our Chair

**Nicky Mann** • PCA Chair

A big cheery welcome to our PCA members, PCA corporate members/sponsors and PCA subscribers. This is our last Undercover newsletter for 2020 and what a year it has been. I am sure all our members and especially our growers and allied trade are busy with the build up to Christmas sales and supply. We hope the market is strong and you get fair prices. For those of you that are lucky to snag time off over Christmas & New Year – we hope you get to spend precious time with family, friends and the ones you love the most! I am sure everyone is looking forward to saying goodbye to 2020 and a big hopeful welcome to 2021!

So I am pleased to report our PCA AGM went well, it was held on Tuesday 1st December, 2020 at 1pm (AEST) and the following members were re-elected to the Board:- Tony Bundock, Matthew Plunkett, Emily Rigby, Marcus van Heijst and myself (Nicky Mann). The Board will be meeting to appoint two independent Directors and will start by interviewing the nominees that were not successful in securing a position on the Board. We are extremely excited about the positive response for nominees to sit on the PCA Board and it gives the Board a lot of confidence to draw on incredible people to serve our members and take our organization forward. Hopefully, the two new Appointed Directors will be announced in early 2021.

[protectedcropping@asnevents.net.au](mailto:protectedcropping@asnevents.net.au)

[www.protectedcropping.net.au](http://www.protectedcropping.net.au)

P: 03 8560 4391

PO Box 200, Balnarring, 3926

So, in 2021 – PCA is planning to ramp up the farm tours across the country to monthly events, continue with the weekly webinars which have proved to be exceptionally popular and we aim to hold a PCA conference in October 2021. The Soilless magazine will be sent out quarterly and we will continue with the monthly e-newsletter written by the Directors. So onwards and upwards!

The PCA Directors, our team at ASN, Jo Archer & Jennifer Stackhouse wish all our PCA members, corporate members/sponsors and subscribers a joyous Christmas and a wonderfully happy New Year! Stay safe and keep well! Thank-you for the amazing job you have done in the most extraordinary year that we have had! We hope you enjoy this edition of Undercover e-newsletter kindly written by our wonderful Directors – whom I feel privileged to stand beside and serve you our members!

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# Situation Reports - Industry Update

**Tony Bundock** • Treasurer and PCA Director who runs his own consultancy and training business  
Genesis Horticultural Solutions based in Narre Warren South, Victoria  
Tony.bundock@protectedcropping.net.au • M: 0409 007 610



What a difference a month makes!

At the start of November Victoria was still seen as the 'leper' state with ongoing Covid-19 cases and lockdown restrictions, and this month we being heralded as the shining example with 43 days (at the time of writing) with no socially transmitted cases of covid.

There is no doubt that at some stage we will see some cases reappear but fingers crossed we will continue on the 0 case track.

With this state of affairs has come a notable lift in both consumer and trade confidence as growers work towards what is being seen as 'Covid normal' operating.

On a personal note, Genesis Horticultural solutions have had the busiest month since March of this year, as growers return to looking for staff training. This month also saw a number of the PCA board members participating in the Western Sydney University greenhouse technical training program as subject matter experts, and it was good to be involved in the training of our next generation of greenhouse managers. In general, the feeling is that we are looking more positively at life and work, and there is a definite air of optimism around the traps.

Produce prices have been varied to say the least. On the soft fruit side some have a differing viewpoint, with some growers reporting a lack of traditional backpacker labour to employ for picking while other growers report a steady stream of labour. Markets are predicting an increase in prices with a perceived shortage of supply but time will tell. Whilst in the greenhouse sector, tomato prices are certainly down with retail stores selling truss tomatoes at \$2.00 a kilo which generally equates to \$1.00 a kilo for wholesale price. Many of the smaller growers are utilising the 'Farmers Markets' and realising a premium for their products.

Probably more of a long term issue is that suppliers of coir are highly worried about securing adequate supplies of material for the next season with hold ups on container traffic. This is certainly an area of concern to many Victorian growers as they plan for the next season.

So Christmas is just around the corner, and more importantly, New Years Eve where we can all collectively tell 2020 to "go forth and multiple" and here's to a brighter 2021!

Have a safe and enjoyable Christmas everyone, and all the best for 2021.



**Shané Steffen** • PCA Director and Chair of Membership & Marketing Committee  
Technical Sales Agronomist at Novum Lifesciences in Queensland.  
Shane.steffen@protectedcropping.net.au • M: 0466 976 399

The rains have come, the growing season in NT has come to a halt as the deluge has begun.

We've been treated with some tantalising rain in QLD as well, here's hoping it is the La Nina that has been foretold. I envision dams full to the brim! Stanthorpe region is still

full-steam ahead with berries, capsicums and leafy greens to name a few currently getting picked, then it will be pome and stone fruits turn! It doesn't stop in Agriculture!

There is still work for pickers so please get in contact with the local Harvest work groups for the region's if you would like to experience working in Protected Cropping and learning about a wide variety of crops at the same time!

## 2021 Regional tours .. networking, learning and sharing

PCA is delighted to announce that it will be facilitating regional tours in 2021. We know how eager Members are keen to catch up, in person, with their peers!

While the program is not finalised, current plans include tours in NSW, SA and QLD and potentially other states subject to COVID-19 conditions..

We hope to have details finalised by late January 2021.

In early 2021, the PCA team will touch base, first, with Corporate Members to assess their interest in tour sponsorships and participation.

In Covid-aware times, numbers will be limited. Financial PCA members will receive 'early bird' access for tour places – and, of course, member discounts.

## On-line webinars and tours - 2021

Due to the popularity of the 2020 online events, PCA will offer 2021 webinars and virtual tours to share information, knowledge and trends within the protected growing sector.

Please contribute to the survey and the link can be found at: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/PCAwebinars>



## Welcome to our new members!

The PCA Board would like to extend our warmest welcome and good wishes to our new members.

We are delighted to have you join our organisation and we hope that you find your membership valuable and rewarding.

Beginning in early 2021, Growing Undercover will list our new members and their organisation. We look forward to many years together.

## Did you know that PCA offers a range of Membership options?

Details of Membership options are available at: <https://protectedcropping.net.au/become-a-member/> or by contacting:

**Jo Archer** M: 0417 114 311 or at [business@protectedcropping.net.au](mailto:business@protectedcropping.net.au)



**Marcus van Heijst** • M: 0415 463 182 • PCA Director & Melbourne based Account Manager for Priva Oceania  
[Marcus.van.heijst@protectedcropping.net.au](mailto:Marcus.van.heijst@protectedcropping.net.au)

With the weather warming up and some areas experiencing heat waves already, the pressure is on for many growers. Ensuring crops are irrigated in a timely manner means making daily or even hourly decisions when to start to irrigate and how often. If you start to irrigate too early you can run the risk of “guttation” which is caused by root pressure when plants are irrigated before the leaves are ‘active’. This can lead to quality issues and plant health problems, especially in fruiting crops. Irrigate too late and plants become stressed which can naturally also lead to problems. Once irrigation has started for the day, getting the frequency right is also critical. Irrigate too often causes water logged soil or substrate which leads to anaerobic conditions and associated issues. Not irrigating enough again leads to water stress. Also making sure that irrigation is stopped in time is important. If irrigating too late in the day will lead to issues especially with crops growing in substrate (eg cocopeat or rock wool) being too wet. Stop too early and the plants may struggle during the night as plants continue to need water throughout the night.

Data from crops grown in different parts of Australia has shown that on hot and/or windy days it may even be necessary to irrigate one or more times at night.

These are just some of the decisions growers need to make on a daily, or even hourly, basis. Among many other aspects of running their business.

Increasingly growers are investing in systems/tools available to help monitor and/or automate some of these processes. This frees them from having to continually monitor and adjust their irrigation strategies allowing them to focus on other aspects of their business.

# What's happening on the Mid North Coast of NSW

**Matthew Plunkett** • Deputy Chair  
Greater Sydney Local Land Services

• M: 0434 147 988

[matthew.plunkett@protectedcropping.net.au](mailto:matthew.plunkett@protectedcropping.net.au)

Over the last 5 years, the protected cropping industry has grown rapidly on the mid North Coast of NSW.

With this expansion in the berry and vegetable industry comes great opportunity but also significant challenges for our industry to manage, particularly around our industries environmental performance.

Community expectations around protection of marine parks and other natural assets will continue to increase.

*The main areas of concern are:*

- chemical application and spray drift
- labour supply and availability
- waste disposal (of netting and substrate including bags)
- wastewater management (nutrient runoff into waterways).

At a recent North Coast Horticulture industry meeting I attended, it is clear that our industry needs greater representation and advocacy at both a local and state government level in this region.

Our growers (and allied trade who support them) do an amazing job growing food, plants and other products for consumers, but need greater support in the areas of advocacy, assistance with writing letters of support for new developments, linking to products and services and more training opportunities.

The idea of a North Coast chapter of the PCA and/or a Mid North Coast Greenhouse Vegetables interest group is gaining momentum and will likely be formed in the early part of 2021 to help address some of the industries and our members concerns.

Whilst cucumbers are the main crop of choice for greenhouse vegetables, many growers are looking at alternatives such as eggplants, capsicums, herbs, beans and figs.

Many berry growers who traditionally grow blueberries have now diversified into growing raspberries and blackberries in addition to growing greenhouse vegetables.

There is also a trend for growers to lease out greenhouses to new growers, which presents significant opportunities for the PCA to offer training programs that meet new growers needs. In response to this need, the NSW VegNET project has developed a Introduction to Greenhouse Cucumber training program that will be rolled out in 2021.

In the last 12 months, a number of growers have asked me what we as an industry can do to better manage waste and wastewater. There are some good examples of work being undertaken to address these concerns in the region.



OzGroup Co-op Ltd, a grower owned cooperative has been working with a local landscaping firm to look at options for receiving and composting used sawdust substrate.

The Clean Coastal Catchments project, funded by the NSW Marine Estate Management Authority and implemented by the NSW Department of Primary Industries and Local Land Services is offering grants for growers who wish to undertake works to minimise nutrient runoff on their properties.

Expressions of Interest for this program close on the 21 December and details can be found [at here](#).

I recently visited a small grower Cheyne Clarke who has received funding under this program to install soil moisture sensors and other technologies to monitor his irrigation and runoff percentages.

Cheyne (pictured under his new development) has also undertaken a lot of research and development on different crops and growing systems over the years I have known him.

It is great to see Cheyne moving into semi closed and medium/high tech structures to give him greater control over yields, quality and what crops he can grow in the future. This will be an increasing trend in years to come within the region.

A great suggestion from a couple of our grower members on the mid North Coast have put forward recently is having a chat group (Whats App or equivalent) so growers can ask questions on a range of topic areas they need assistance with. This is a great way to offer more value to our grower members and link growers with our Corporate Allied Trade members for assistance.

Wishing all our members a very Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

Warm Regards

Matt Plunkett  
Deputy Chair  
Protected Cropping Australia

# Clean Coastal Catchments

Working with growers to keep sediment and nutrients on farm and out of coastal waterways, while supporting profitable and sustainable agriculture.

## Grants for on-ground-works - landholder guidelines

### Project background

The Clean Coastal Catchments Project (CCC) is funded under the NSW Government's Marine Estates Management Strategy.

#### The Strategy's vision:

*A healthy coast and sea, managed for the greatest wellbeing of the community, now and into the future.*

**The NSW Marine Estate Management Strategy identified agricultural diffuse source pollution as a priority threat to water quality and the Marine Estate. This project will help farmers in intensive coastal agricultural industries to:**

- better manage nutrient inputs and runoff to become more productive and profitable.
- reduce their impact on water quality and the marine estate.
- improve the long term economic and environmental sustainability of intensive agricultural systems in coastal NSW.
- increase export market access and social licence to operate through improved land and water stewardship.

### Size of grants

Grants of up to \$10,000 will be available.

### Grants for on-farm works

Blueberry, blackberry, raspberry and greenhouse vegetable growers within the North Coast region are eligible to apply for this grant.

If you are unsure whether your property is within the project area please call:

**Melinda Simpson on 0447 081 765 or  
Julie Dart on 0427 007 501**

### Activities eligible for funding

**Activities that are eligible for CCC grants include:**

- irrigation/fertigation system retrofits/upgrades that improve water use efficiency
- water treatment/re-use/recycling systems
- riparian/ perimeter re-vegetation or buffer zones to filter water runoff from farm land
- erosion control including structural works and re-vegetation
- grass filter strips
- application of compost and mulch
- construction of nutrient detention ponds, artificial wetlands and filter ponds
- construction of diversion banks and contour banks to control run-off
- modified fertiliser use to reduce nutrient loss/run-off

Activities not listed above that are likely to achieve reductions in the movement of nutrients from a farm may also be eligible for funding. These activities will be considered on a case-by-case basis. Please note that proposing an eligible activity does not guarantee that your application will be successful. Your project will be assessed against the essential criteria in this document. It will need to meet a minimum benchmark and be compared with other applications.

### Expressions of interest close on Monday 21st December 2020

**Completed and signed forms can be emailed to:**

[julie.dart@lls.nsw.gov.au](mailto:julie.dart@lls.nsw.gov.au)

### **[Click here](#) for full guidelines, EOI form & for further information**

**For any questions about the program, please contact one of the project officers:**

[julie.dart@lls.nsw.gov.au](mailto:julie.dart@lls.nsw.gov.au) or 0427 007 501

[melinda.simpson@dpi.nsw.gov.au](mailto:melinda.simpson@dpi.nsw.gov.au) or 0447 081 765

[matthew.plunkett@lls.nsw.gov.au](mailto:matthew.plunkett@lls.nsw.gov.au) or 0428 978 390

**"The NVPCC glasshouse delivers high-quality research outcomes that improve Australia's ability to produce food crops in advanced protected cropping systems"**

Professor  
Chen



*Prof Chen and his team have been awarded for raising awareness of the importance of horticulture and in particular, protected cropping.*

## Protected cropping team gets recognition

The team at Western Sydney University (WSU) that presents Australia's leading protected cropping course, has received recognition from the Australian Institute of Horticulture. Each year AIH celebrates excellence in horticulture recognising diverse projects, experiences and people and acknowledging their achievements.

This year Prof Zhonghua Chen and the team from WSU received an Award of Merit for raising awareness of the importance of horticulture in today's world. The award was given in recognition of food donations made to the charity Foodbank NSW and ACT from the National Protected Cropping Centre's Glasshouse at the University's Hawkesbury campus.

In the past three years, more than 58 tonnes of fresh produce has been produced and donated to the charity. The fresh produce is grown in the glasshouse as part of trials into glasshouse horticulture optimisation, has proven to be a source of fresh, clean and highly nutritious produce. Once it has been analysed, weighed and cleaned, the produce is in an ideal condition for donating to Foodbank NSW and ACT.

"The NVPCC glasshouse delivers high-quality research outcomes that improve Australia's ability to produce food crops in advanced protected cropping systems," said Professor Chen.

He said current research in the glasshouse at WSU includes trials of smart glass films that could save on glasshouse cooling costs, indoor pollination of crops using native stingless bees, and variety trials of eggplants, cucumbers and melons that could improve regional food production options.

