

AGRITECH GRANT HELPS ARAURA COUNTRY FARM ADOPT FERTIGATION

The Ministry of Finance and Economic Management (MFEM) is pleased to announce it has awarded Aitutaki's Araura Country Farm a SMART AgriTech Scheme grant, to support their shift from traditional to technology-led farming methods. Araura Country Farm will use the grant to purchase and install a Venturi Fertigation Irrigation Network System to mechanise and improve their existing open field farming business.

Fertigation is the latest technology used for nourishing horticulture crops. It involves adding fertilizers and soil amendments directly through an irrigation network system. Soil amendments are materials added to soil to improve its physical properties, such as water retention, permeability, water infiltration, drainage, aeration, and structure.

While fertigation is the latest global practice adopted by farmers world-wide, it is still only in very limited use in the Cook Islands. On the island of Aitutaki, few people have employed non-traditional methods of farming, so success rates are mostly dependent on the weather and hard labour. Fortunately, Araura Country Farm owner Fred Charlie has the ex-



pertise to install and operate fertigation systems and is excited about the opportunity to gain the advantages it offers over more traditional manual farming practices.

"There is an absolute business need for efficiency in irrigating and ensuring nutrients get to the plants as fast and efficiently as possible, with the aid of water that will help break down the nutrients into digestible components for the plant," Fred explains. "Using the fertigation method ensures sufficient nutrients reach each crop in the patch, which enables crops to produce at a much faster rate and reach the best of quality at harvest. It also has other advantages – it's more efficient because there's less labour input required, lower water use and less fertilizer applied, and it reduces soil erosion."

Araura Country Farm already supplies tomatoes, capsicum, banana, pawpaw and watermelon to the local supermarkets and dairy stores and also exports some crops to Rarotonga. Once operating with the new fertigation system,

total yields and quality of the crops are expected to be higher, enabling the business to expand its customer base and increase their competitive advantage.

Most importantly, Araura Country Farm's fertigation project will help boost the supply of fresh, locally grown fruit and vegetables. This is critical to reducing our reliance on imported produce and supporting consumption of fresh food for the health and wellbeing of our people.

