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Arming vegetable growers to combat fall armyworm

The vegetable industry and Hort Innovation are ramping up efforts in the fight against fall armyworm through a nationally coordinated program to reduce the pest's population and its impact.

Delivered through Hort Innovation and led by the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries Queensland, the \$2.1M initiative will arm vegetable growers with the tools and knowledge they need to wage war on the ravenous pest.

To improve the industry's ability to manage the pest, the program will deliver an array of educational opportunities for vegetable growers to learn more about the pest and its management, including on-farm demonstrations, field days and workshops.

Fall armyworm was first detected in Australia in the Torres Strait in January 2020 and has since spread to every State and Territory except South Australia. The pest is known to feed on more than 350 different plant species, including fruits and vegetables, and can travel up to 400km a night – making it challenging to curb its geographical spread.

Hort Innovation chief executive officer Brett Fifield said that it is crucial to get vegetable growers on the front foot when it comes to monitoring for and managing this pest.

"Fall armyworm is here to stay, so we are equipping the vegetable industry with what they need to reduce the pest's impact while remaining productive and profitable," Mr Fifield said.

"This program will accelerate our response towards the pest by rapidly bringing cutting edge science into vegetable growers' management tool kits, developing best practice guidelines for vegetable growers and ensuring these are communicated widely."

Department of Agriculture and Fisheries Queensland (DAFQ) senior extension officer Dr Heidi Parkes said the program brings research and experience insights into fall armyworm management from across the globe into on-farm demonstration sites within Australian vegetable growing regions.

"The industry demonstration and engagement activities will be underpinned by world-class research to ensure the vegetable industry is getting the most up to date information available," she said. "The program will also provide a mechanism for industry to identify and remedy gaps in knowledge, skills, technology or practices that need to be addressed through further research."

AUSVEG chief executive officer Michael Coote said that the program will bolster the resilience of vegetable growers and position the industry for ongoing success.

"Since fall armyworm arrived on our shores, vegetable growers have quickly stepped into action to combat the pest," he said. "This investment will fortify our industry against fall armyworm's impact and ensure that there are no disruptions to the supply of fresh produce to Australians."

Since the incursion, Hort Innovation has been involved in a host of initiatives to combat the pest, including:

- Identifying potential fall armyworm predators (a collaborative effort involving the melon, nursery, sweetpotato, turf and vegetable industries).
- Researching fall armyworm pheromones to aid in the development of baits for monitoring and trapping.
- Developing a molecular test for use in the field for early detection and identification of the pest.
- Releasing a podcast series with international experts on their fall armyworm experience to educate growers.