

Maori orchard transformational for communities



Pictured at the lunch of the Maori Kiwifruit Growers Forum are from left Homman Tapsell, Doug Brown (NZKGI), Kiritapu Allan, Nikki Johnson (CEO NZKGI), Haki McRoberts, Laini Jager (CEO Zespri), Te Ururoa Flavell, Minister for Maori Development, James Wheeler, Maria Rauloud, Amy Porter (Zespri), Tiaka Hunia (chairman of the Maori Kiwifruit Growers Forum).

Maori kiwifruit ventures have the potential to transform communities and the lives of rural people by creating employment and boosting economic performance in the regions, says Tiaki Hunia, chairman of the Maori Kiwifruit Growers Forum.

There is latent potential in much Maori land. "Some of the land suitable for conversion to kiwifruit orchards is currently growing maize at a return of around \$1000 a hectare when it could return up to \$100,000 and more a hectare from gold kiwifruit."

To unlock the potential of land suitable for conversion, and many existing Maori kiwifruit orchards, improved levels of education and training for Maori owners will be needed.

Among the roles of the forum are to provide growers with opportunities to gain education and training to ensure their businesses thrive, Tiaki says.

Officially launched in June, the forum advocates for the interests of Maori growers and is a partnership between Maori kiwifruit growers, Te Puni Kōkiri and Zespri.

"The forum has two years to prove itself and we will be working hard on behalf of growers to do that because if, after two years, Maori growers can't see its value, then there will be no forum," says Tiaki.

Education and training, particularly for young Maori, is a major focus but so too is providing Maori growers with timely and relevant data and information to support their decision-making and increase returns.

The forum represents Maori growers in all the major kiwifruit growing regions from Northland to Nelson. Green kiwifruit makes up the largest proportion of the crop from Maori orchards, but in line with the rest of

the industry, gold volumes are rapidly increasing.

The growers represented by the forum produce around eight per cent of Zespri's export production. "We want to see that grow to 20 per cent and more," says Tiaki.

Many Maori orchards are leased to individuals or post-harvest companies, but over time these will return to Maori owners so the lift in production will come partly from Maori owners managing their own orchards, and from new greenfield orchard developments such as those at Te Kaha carried out together with investors who will eventually return the orchards to its owners.

The forum is looking at where Maori are in the kiwifruit workforce, where some of the gaps are, and what can be done to encourage and upskill more Maori into roles right through the industry from working on orchards, to management, to marketing and ideally around the world as advocates, branding and marketing New Zealand kiwifruit.

"There are gaps in education and training and we need super heroes as role model who will show young people that horticulture offers great career opportunities and that it is not just a seasonal job."

However, there are barriers to training, especially for those living in areas some distance from training providers. A solution may be to take the trainers to the students, says Tiaki.

Lifting skill levels and increasing the economic performance of Maori kiwifruit orchards is good not just for Maori, but the whole of New Zealand, as it will increase employment and help lift the nation's export returns. There are environmental benefits too,

he says. Maori owners take a long-term inter-generational view because typically traditional lands are not for sale, so close attention is paid to sustainability, including water quality, use of resources and the retirement of sensitive areas.

Elaine Fisher