

# Growing for the future

**One of the nation's leading fresh fruit and vegetable companies has its eyes firmly set on its place within the fresh produce industry and the development of rural farming communities.**

**T**he Premier Fruits Group which has farms in the rich growing areas of southern Queensland and NSW is looking to expand its growing operations, transport and logistics services and introducing new and innovative product marketing.

"There are many opportunities emerging in the industry now and through our national network we are poised to play a strong role in it," said Premier's Chief Executive Officer, Anthony Di Pietro.

"We want to move to greater vertical integration so everyone in our supply chain – from growers to retailers – gets value for money, quality produce, and efficiency in service," he said.

"This is why we have a strong commitment to local farming communities in regional and rural Australia and the operations of the central wholesale markets throughout Australia."

However, Mr. Di Pietro emphasised that despite the consolidation taking place in many of the farming communities, he was cautious of the flow of funds from major institutions that lacked the backing of industry knowledge or understanding.

"There is a continuing need for local expertise in farming in conjunction with new technology and investment," he said.

In line with this, Mr. Di Pietro said Premier was already developing relationships with shared services solutions providers to enhance its



Premier's crops at its Childers farms.

logistics and transport operations because of the critical position they held in the fresh supply chain.

"Logistics is a very important part of the industry. It not only involves the growers, wholesalers and retailers, but it is also essential to the quality assurance and compliance aspects of the products.

"The industry is on the right path in strongly focussing on these areas, such as having the right product in the right cool room and the maintenance of the life of the product, because it is critical to the relationship between growers and retailers."

Mr. Di Pietro said greater emphasis was also being placed on

the significant change in the eating habits and lifestyle of Australians and their influence on the industry.

"You only have to look at what people are doing with their own lifestyles to realise that their desires for healthy foods are putting a significant focus on the supply chain to meet their demands," he said.

Over the last 40 years, the area of land sown to crops in Australia has more than doubled, highlighting improved plant genetics, greater variety in plant species and increased mechanisation, as well as better control of pests and diseases.

Premier is also putting a lot of its focus on many of the emerging fruits and vegetables which meet the



Anthony on farm

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maturing tastes for Australians. Zucchini, eggplant, capsicum, melons and avocados are now complementing the traditional products, such as tomatoes, sweet corn, beans, pumpkins and citrus, which have been the foundation of the company.

In the Bundaberg area where Premier has more than 1000 acres under crops in Childers, this focus is an excellent working example.

Since acquiring the land more than three years ago, Premier has transformed it from a non-profitable mix of cane and vegetable farming to a high yielding vegetable producer.

One of the key factors to the success has been not only the well-developed existing water supplies through bores and dams, but also through innovative water management. For example, the plastic and trickle watering of zucchini, as well as the planting of seedlings rather than seeds produces higher yields with less water requirements.

"We have an open working relationship with local growers, as well as the sharing of expertise which is enabling us to produce disease free plants and good quality products for programmed and fresh market sales," said Mr Di Pietro.

In the Whitton area, which is the oldest town in the Murrumbidgee Irrigation area, and has been a cornerstone of the Premier group for much of its 50 plus years in the industry, there is a similar working relationship.

"Whitton is a very good example of the success of relationships in this industry. We want to ensure that our growers are secure with the people with whom they are dealing and that they know we have the sales and management expertise to assist them over the long term."

Grower loyalty is also one of the reasons behind Premier keeping an 'eye' on the market for potential future acquisitions and greater growth in the farming districts.

"We have a lot of offer. We are a very sound organisation and can provide a wide range of specialists' services to growers, as well as to customers, from which everyone can benefit," he added.



Premier Fruits' Brisbane Markets operation.

Premier also distinguishes itself through its commitment to the operations of the central wholesale markets.

The company is a member of the central markets in Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne and Perth and Mr. Di Pietro dismisses arguments that the markets are inefficient.

"The markets are of enormous benefit to the growers and the retailers because they are the best place to determine and stabilize prices. They provide the most competitive environment you can get.

"They should get a lot more recognition from the industry than they do. Unfortunately, over the past decade some major companies, in their attempt to monopolize sections of supply, have influenced some

retailers and growers away from central markets through a negative publicity campaign.

"It is critical that competition be upheld in the future to ensure survival of growers with realistic pricing for their products and access to sales. It should not be sales which are influenced by monopolisation.

"Areas of logistical inefficiencies and infrastructure development, along with upgrades in quality assurance and safety are being enhanced by companies serious about their own and the industry's future."

This approach is also in line with many of the industry policies of most state governments where there is a strong commitment to the central market concept and its role in open access for all in the supply chain.



Premier Fruits specialised transport operations.