

Media release

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Australian and African farmers tackle food security

New digital technologies are being embraced by an ever-increasing number of grain growers who are realising the potential for 'smart devices' to lift the efficiency and productivity of their businesses and to raise the profile of their profession.

Australian and Ethiopian farmers are benefitting from an initiative that has connected growers from both sides of the globe and is shining a spotlight on sustainable crop production and food security.

BCG board member and Birchip farmer John Ferrier is involved in the initiative which recently saw him journey to Ethiopia where he met with farmers to share his farming experiences and to hear about the challenges and opportunities faced by his African counterparts.

John said the trip, which was funded by the Crawford Fund, highlighted opportunities for collaboration and learning for farmers in both countries.

"I learned so much from the trip and was particularly struck by the challenges faced by Ethiopian farmers," he said.

"I am now exploring the possibilities of using BCG's experience in transferring the latest technologies to farmers and skilling scientists to communicate their findings to farmers in a practical way on the ground."

While in Ethiopia, Mr Ferrier also attended meetings about *SIMLESA* – Sustainable Intensification of Maize-Legume cropping systems for food security in Eastern and Southern Africa program.

SIMLESA is a collaborative project Australia supports through the Australian Centre for International Research (ACIAR) and managed by the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT) in collaboration with the Association for Strengthening Agricultural Research in East and Central Africa (ASARECA) and national research centres of Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique and Tanzania.

Additional *SIMLESA* partners include the International Center for Research for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT), the Agricultural Research Council of South Africa (ARC RSA), the Department of Employment, Economic Development and Innovation, Queensland, and Murdoch University in Western Australia.

John said he learned a lot from the trip and was particularly struck by the challenges and opportunities faced by Ethiopian farmers.

“Ethiopia has a population of 90 million people and 80 per cent of the population are farmers,” he said.

“Population growth, hunger and poverty are the reasons better food security is necessary and increased farm production is the way forward as very little new land is available to be farmed.

“Many Australian farmers deal with low rainfall but in the region of Ethiopia I visited, the annual rainfall is between 800 and 1000mm but maize yields can be as low as 1t/ha and wheat is around 2.5 t/ha.”

The SIMLESA is trying to assist the Africa farmers towards resilient and sustainable cropping rotations including beans in the inter row with maize. Improved drought resistant varieties of maize that are adapted to climate change and climate variability are also being introduced along with using minimum tillage cropping and crop residue management practices.

John said SIMLESA is also working on improving seed supply to farmers, developing conservation agricultural system (with most farmers having some livestock) and increasing the supply and use of fertiliser.

“And the speed with which these new technologies are being adopted is being monitored,” he said.

During his time in Ethiopia John spent two days travelling with local Rift Valley farmer Alemayehu Mekonnen.

“We stopped numerous times to talk to farmers who were using traditional methods of growing maize,” he said.

“They were using oxen pulling a single furrow plough.”

The limited use of fertiliser by farmers in the region was surprising for John.

“When I asked the farmers if they used fertiliser the common response was no, their justification being that if they spent money on fertiliser they wouldn’t have enough money to feed their families,” he said.

“I learned that many farmers farm 1 to 1.5ha and are only self-sufficient for their families. Women are doing a lot of the work in the fields and are responsible for planting, weeding and marketing and are better managers of the money, investing in better a lifestyle including food and education for their children.

“Productive farms are not seen as making a profit but as a means of getting cash to support families.”

The farms being managed by John’s guide Alemayehu’s farms have been developed with help from SIMLESA and now produce quality maize and bean seed under irrigation to supply farmers with seed for planting.

“Cattle and goats also are fattened on his farm,” John said.

“It was good to see many farmers trying to secure seed from Alemayehu. Some farmers travel up to 80km on a motorbike to try to secure seed.”

SIMLESA is communicating new technologies in the region through knowledge-sharing, focusing on delivering science to the soil.

“The SIMLESA project is having a very good impact at grass roots level to improve livelihoods of small scale farmers in Ethiopia and Eastern and Southern Africa,” John said.

“I am impressed at the commitment and involvement of Australian partners in this project –ACIAR, The Crawford Fund and University of Queensland.”

For further information contact John Ferrier at BCG (03) 5492 2787 or visit the SIMLESA website <http://aciar.gov.au/page/simlesa-program>