

## INTERVENTION HIGHLIGHT

### Maintaining Tonga's sweet watermelon trade to New Zealand

#### Watermelon farmers improve postharvest practices

Despite a promising growth trajectory for Tongan watermelons, the industry has been marred by several operational and biosecurity related issues, including poor production practices, pest and disease management and post-harvest handling. PHAMA Plus continues to support Tonga to further strengthen its existing watermelon export pathway to New Zealand and explore innovative ways to expand trade opportunities.

#### At a glance

- New Zealand imports around 800 to 1,000 tonnes of watermelon from Tonga and Australia during the third quarter of the year before local supplies become available.
- Supporting improvements to the watermelon export pathway is a key focus for PHAMA Plus's work in Tonga, coordinated through the Tonga Watermelon Export Taskforce (TWET).
- A part of PHAMA Plus support has been working with the New Zealand Institute for Plant and Food Research (PFR) to provide a diagnostic assessment of the Tongan watermelon pathway to examine the likely reasons for a range of quality issues being detected in the New Zealand market.
- The exercise recommended ways of managing these risks with immediate corrective actions which were approved by TWET.



#### Export pathway training

Key activities supported by PHAMA Plus were two early-season visits by New Zealand Plant and Food Research (NZ-PFR) experts to offer training and support in pest and disease control. The experts focused on best-practice pest control techniques, including integrated pest management (IPM), insecticide selection and spray techniques. They also addressed disease control technologies, covering disease recognition, fungicide use and preventive strategies. Training comprised classroom sessions, farm visits and interactive discussions, targeting farmers, MAFF and MTED staff, Nishi Trading staff, agronomists and input suppliers. Additionally, mentoring for emerging female staff in private and government agencies involved in horticultural export pathways was provided, as identified as a need during previous in-country inputs by NZ-PFR in November 2022.

#### Benefits

To assess the overall effectiveness of the training and technical assistance provided by NZ-PFR experts, PHAMA Plus conducted a rapid assessment among participating farmers.

- Feedback from all farmers involved in the assessment indicated enhanced understanding of pest and disease management, as well as cost-effective control and prevention measures.
- Growers reported substantial savings in pesticide and chemical costs, averaging TOP585 (AUD375) per hectare. These savings were attributed to the knowledge acquired through NZ-PFR trainings.
- Extrapolating these savings across all participating farmers, an estimated TOP61,227 (AUD38,332) was projected to be saved. This underscores the effectiveness of the training in reducing production costs and enhancing farmers' income.
- Overall, the training program benefited 25 households, comprising 49 men and 45 women actively engaged in watermelon cultivation.