

# Rebuilding Samoa's taro sector and strengthening export readiness

## PHAMA Plus Performance Story

Taro is central to Samoa's food security, cultural identity and rural livelihoods. It remains a key cash crop and provides one of the few scalable opportunities for smallholders to earn cash income from agriculture. The sector has an estimated annual value of around WST121 million (approximately AUD64 million) and supports over 18,000 households across the country.

### **Taro's dual role as a staple food and a cash crop sits at the heart of its recent history in Samoa and shapes how the market system works today.**

Samoa's core agrifood system has been subject to consecutive shocks over recent decades. From the devastating impacts of taro leaf blight (TLB), to long-term disruptions to market dynamics driven by COVID-19, and the current challenges of labour shortages and feral pigs. Support was needed to sustain and strengthen critical production systems, and re-orient for a different post-COVID market environment where strong domestic demand and prices compete with low-margin international markets.

Rebuilding Samoa's taro sector has required a long-term approach to strengthening systems, and positioning the sector to make the most of both strong domestic markets and export opportunities. This performance story highlights three connected areas of contribution by PHAMA and PHAMA Plus: addressing supply constraints; strengthening biosecurity systems for export pathways; and enabling market access and value-adding.

While supply constraints remain, there is strong evidence that the Australian and New Zealand governments have helped to rebuild and stabilise Samoa's taro sector through their investments through PHAMA and PHAMA Plus, delivered in partnership with the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (MAF), the Scientific Research Organisation of Samoa (SROS) and the private sector.

Export market access has been protected and maintained, and as production levels grow and efficiencies made, the country is well placed to make the most of international demand.



*Mano Isaako, Siumu and Aisa Vaofefe at their tiapula nursery in Siumu district on Upolu Island.*

## What did PHAMA and PHAMA Plus do?

### Addressed supply constraints for planting material (tiapula)

When availability of tiapula became critical to food security and commercial production, PHAMA Plus worked with MAF and sector stakeholders to identify the absence of commercial nurseries as a key constraint. The program supported the establishment of a mixed nursery model to strengthen MAF nursery production while also introducing private nurseries and commercial farmers.

This approach helped shift perceptions of planting material away from a welfare entitlement towards a paid, higher-value input, creating a market that didn't previously exist and in turn supporting more sustainable production systems. In the short term, PHAMA Plus also supported rapid responses to

lift production for food security, including the distribution of 200,000 planting materials to 327 farmers.

Momentum in the nursery system has continued. Land being used for nurseries is expanding as farmers crowd into the new market. Between March and November 2024, nurseries produced more than 700,000 planting materials, which were channelled through exporters and intermediaries to more than 200 supplier farmers, strengthening the foundation for future production growth. Importantly, varieties under production combine TLB tolerance with larger corm size and acceptable eating quality, for stronger commercial and export suitability.



*Tauilili Polito Vili*

Tauilili Polito Vili runs a large farm with 50 acres of taro. But in recent years, something unexpected has taken root: a thriving tiapula nursery that has become one of the most productive in his district.

Tauilili was one of the farmers supported by PHAMA Plus to receive training, equipment and 1,500 tiapula to start nursery production. What began as a small, quarter-acre plot quickly surprised him. The tiapula grew fast, strong, and plentiful—and the demand from other farmers was immediate.

In just 2 years, Tauilili is now selling more than 4,500 tiapula a week. His small starter plot has expanded to 3 acres, with more land already earmarked for further growth. For Tauilili, the nursery has become a key part of his business, while also helping him to support neighbouring farmers to build the future for Samoan taro.

### Strengthened biosecurity systems for export pathways

PHAMA and PHAMA Plus investments have supported Samoa to manage biosecurity risks through strengthened surveillance, testing capabilities, diagnostics, increased processing and value-addition, fumigation and treatment systems, aligned with import-country requirements. These investments have helped Samoa avoid market access constraints for taro and other crops and protect hard-won access to key markets.

Importantly, system strengthening has been grounded in local leadership. The effectiveness and sustainability of these efforts have been enhanced by guidance from the public-private sector Market Access Working Group, and by delivering through genuine partnerships with MAF and SROS. These contributions are particularly important with the recent establishment of the Samoa Export Authority, signalling Samoa's commitment to sustaining biosecurity and market access gains through its own systems.

## Improved technical readiness to export

PHAMA and PHAMA Plus have supported improvements in processing infrastructure, cold-chain facilities and compliance systems, including packhouse capability and certifications and reefer capacity for product quality. A particular focus has been supporting infrastructure for frozen exports, which provides a range of benefits for exports – they are subject to lower biosecurity thresholds so offer a lower risk market pathway which is particularly important when margins are tight; frozen produce is also less time sensitive than fresh produce, allowing exporters the flexibility to fill orders over a longer period to better manage supply flows and labour constraints. Samoan taro exporters are now strongly positioned to capitalise on New Zealand, American Samoan and Australian markets when consistent exportable volumes become available.

## Results at a glance

- Despite significant shocks, taro remains a cornerstone of Samoa's rural economy, valued at around WST3.8 million (approximately AUD2.1 million) and supporting 18,000+ households.
- 200,000 planting materials were distributed to 327 farmers to rapidly boost production for food security.
- A public-private nursery model, supported by PHAMA Plus and MAF, has created a commercial market for tiapula, expanded access to improved planting material and strengthened farm-level production capacity.
- 700,000+ planting materials were produced through nurseries (Mar–Nov 2024) and supplied to 200+ farmers, strengthening production and supply linkages. Tiapula production continues to expand, with more farmers crowding in to the new market.
- National production is showing strong signs of recovery, with average annual volumes now exceeding 20,000 tonnes.
- Samoa's export systems and exporter capacity are well established, enabling strong domestic markets as well as the ability to respond to international demand.



*Saolotoga Pupi, Foundations for Farming, root crop exporter on Upolu Island.*

## What should happen next?

Evidence from this work points to several practical priorities for the next phase of support:

1. **Treat taro as a strategic cash crop**, sequencing export ambitions behind genuine production gains to avoid undermining food security or domestic markets.
2. **Consolidate and scale the mixed public-private nursery model**, including deeper coverage in Savai'i to maintain MAF's nursery focus on social protection and subsistence households, and enable private nurseries to continue to strengthen and grow for commercial production.
3. **Address binding on-farm constraints**, including labour shortages, limited mechanisation options and feral pig damage that continue to restrict production volumes. Development and implementation of a National Feral Pig Management Strategy is a key priority.
4. **Maintain and protect biosecurity and market access gains** through continued investment in core systems, ensuring Samoa remains export-ready from a technical and regulatory perspective even during production downturns. Avoid further export infrastructure expansion that outpaces farm-level supply.