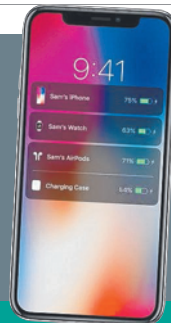


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Agri firm looks for funds to expand

GLEN NORRIS

BRISBANE-BASED agri-business startup Hydrox Technologies is looking to raise up to \$10 million in a capital raising to expand production of its award-winning plastic mulch.

Hydrox Technologies general manager Mark Trenchard said the company would meet with private equity firms and high-net worth individuals in both Australia and the US in the coming weeks about the investment.

Mr Trenchard (pictured) said the funds would be used to expand factory facilities and establish export markets for the mulch that is used by small crop farmers to preserve soil moisture and warmth.

The product was earlier this year named one of the best new products at the World Ag Expo in California and has attracted interest from as far away as China and India.

Hydrox recently attracted \$100,000 in funding through the State Government's Advance Queensland Ignite Ideas Fund.

Mr Trenchard with brother Rob are third-generation plastic manufacturers who arrived in Australia from South Africa as

teenagers in the 1990s.

After studying business at the University of Queensland, one of their first ventures was making plastic bags for aquariums to transport tropical fish.

They later moved into agriculture-related products, including plastic wrap for cucumbers.

Looking around for cheap machinery after the 2011 floods in Brisbane they chanced upon an old plastic extrusion machine. Through trial and error and adaption of the machinery they produced a plastic mulch cover that not only used 24 per cent less plastic than other mulches, but shrank when exposed to sunlight.

That not only made it easier to lay on the ground but preserved ground warmth and moisture, improving crop yields. The company now sells 800 tonnes each year of the plastic.

Plastic mulch for agriculture is a \$4 billion industry globally and markets such as India could be lucrative for the company in the future.

Hydrox, based in Brisbane's Sumner Park, was one of 11 agtech companies supported by the State Government to travel to Tel Aviv in Israel for a trade mission in August.



INNOVATIVE IDEAS: Future Fitouts founders Aaron and Lauren Lowe.

Team on a mission to be the best

EMMALINE STIGWOOD

TURNING the boring offices of Brisbane into fun work spaces is the secret behind the success of a local company that was started in a garage just eight years ago.

Founded by carpenter Aaron Lowe, who then convinced his now wife Lauren to join the company, Future Fitouts has set its sights on being the best in town with a string of major clients getting them to transform shops, child care centres and office spaces.

"We are not out to the be

the biggest fitout company, or interested in expanding into other states, but we will be known as the best company in Brisbane," said Mr Lowe. "I get comments every day from business owners on how their business has improved and staff are more productive as a result from a new office space; people are wanting to come to work and be in a nice feeling space."

From its Fortitude Valley headquarters the business now has eight full-time office staff, as well as up to 15 carpenters and 20 subcon-

tractors across various jobs.

Mrs Lowe, who brought her background in property valuation and development to the company, said Future Fitouts' success was built on knowing the local market and it had recently worked on projects for Suncorp, C&K Childcare, Mercedes and Night Owl.

Future Fitouts is a finalist in the 2018 Telstra Queensland Business Awards. The winners will be announced on Thursday. News Corp, publisher of *The Courier-Mail*, is the media partner for the awards.

Lacklustre Wall St puts market in soft spot

THE Australian sharemarket is expected to have a soft start to the week after a busy Friday night on US and European markets amounted to little.

The ASX200 futures contract was down seven points at the close on Friday and is expected to start five or 10 points lower today.

"Basically we've seen Wall Street and European markets rally not much though, it was only small moves," AMP Capital's chief economist Shane Oliver said yesterday. "European markets are up about 0.2 per cent, the Dow Jones had a good run, I think some of the banks helped out there, the Dow was up almost 95 points which is 0.4 per cent but tech stocks were virtually flat."

Along with some continuing weakness in the iron ore price on Friday after the Australian market closed, it's made for a slow start to the week, he said.

"What was a lot of action out there on Friday night it looks like a fairly soft open tomorrow," Dr Oliver said.

Continued speculation of a US trade war is keeping investors anxious, but the market seems to be factoring in the US President Donald Trump's treatment of his allies to some degree.

Locally, the Reserve Bank minutes will be released this week and is likely to reinforce the bank's optimism for growth, Dr Oliver said.

The June job figures will also be released, with another solid rise predicted but unemployment is expected to continue at about 5.4 per cent.

"So really all we are doing at the moment is generating enough jobs to cover the new entrants into the workforce from higher levels of immigration and population growth," Dr Oliver said.

On Friday, the ASX200 closed flat at 6268.40 points. The Australian dollar was trading at US\$74.25¢ yesterday.

Mackay firm develops renewable energy solutions

AN energy and mining services company based in Mackay has developed a fully self-contained eco donga that it is now showcasing to the world.

Linked Group founder Jason Sharam said it was now linking with robotics partners to enhance its "EcoHabitat" which can be placed on site without the need for fitout from electricians or plumbers because it has its own solar panels and water tanks.

It was one of the ideas

showcased at the Myriad Festival in Brisbane in May.

Mr Sharam said that Linked Group got noticed because it is unique in the mining region.

"It's not often that you associate mining with renewable energy," he said. "But the two can co-exist and it is possible to reduce emissions and improve workplace health and safety by eliminating diesel fumes from the environment."

"The beauty of our EcoHabitat donga is that it has

major cost savings being fully self-sufficient with solar power and water tanks. It's interconnected so resources can be shared.

"We met with potential robotics partners who can help us automate our production line and with other startups we can help to reduce electricity overheads by converting to renewable energy."

"We were also able to engage with international speakers about revolutionary

technologies. Taking these insights back to our business will guide us in growing new opportunities and creating more jobs."

Innovation Minister Kate Jones said Linked Group was a great example of an innovative Mackay business that was kicking goals internationally.

"Renewable energy is a growth area when it comes to creating sustainable jobs for the people of this state," Ms Jones said.

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