



**LEARNING CURVE:** New Zealand Grain and Seed Trade Association general manager Thomas Chin has had to quickly develop a working knowledge of the big arable trade issues. Photo: Johnny Houston

# Feeling at home in arable

New Zealand's seed breeders could be among the first beneficiaries of a favourable Trans-Pacific Partnership, grain and seed industry leader Thomas Chin says. He talks to **Tim Fulton** about early days in the top job.

**M**EMBERS of the New Zealand Grain and Seed Trade Association (NZGSTA) have been waiting 23 years to crack rules governing plant variety rights.

Thomas Chin has been the association's general manager for a little more than 12 months and is feeling the weight of expectation in that area.

NZ law leaves plant breeders vulnerable to exploitation by competitors who can get access to their intellectual property.

A favourable Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) between the 12 signatories would stitch up those legal holes and stimulate investment in plant technology, Chin said.

"I know that my predecessors and others have strongly championed the Government to move on this and I just think the conclusion of the TPP will make that happen," he said.

Chin has had to quickly develop a working knowledge of the big arable trade issues.

Until late 2012 he had worked almost exclusively as an advocate for alcohol brewers and distillers. He knew next to nothing about

farming, except for memories of his grandparents' market garden in Hawke's Bay.

But he felt he had achieved a career landmark after the Government's latest round of alcohol law reform.

It was time to move on and the 97-year-old grain and seed industry body seemed like a good turning point.

His first year with the NZGSTA, which included the mechanics of finding a permanent head office, was also adjusting to a second role, as manager of the NZ Plant Breeding and Research Association.

He made a logistical breakthrough last month with a shift to a 160ha business park on Kirk Rd at Templeton, just west of Christchurch.

The bonus of the site, formerly a psychiatric hospital, is having the Foundation for Arable Research across the car park.

It was a good synergy between growers and the trade, he said.

The location takes Chin even further from those liquor-centric days in Auckland. Whereas not long ago he wouldn't have given grass and livestock a second thought he can see now it's part of the cropping food chain.

Still, he doesn't pretend to have had an arable re-birth.

"Twelve months might have gone past but you can't just say that you know the stuff. You're working with people who have had a whole lifetime in the grain and seed business," he said.

NZGSTA represents breeders, researchers, processors and traders, but also less obvious components such as transporters and chemical and bag makers.

It's a breathtakingly wide slice of agriculture but Chin said no one gave him the job because he was an expert on primary industry.

His remit was to raise the arable sector's visibility and profile. He soon found common ground with regulators and policy-makers, who had also been largely unaware of the industry's role in food production.

different to other primary sectors and I think my appointment here was to raise those knowledge levels with those key people in decision-making," he said.

The visits and information-gathering should go both ways, he said. He wants to bring officials to major cropping areas like Canterbury so they can see the industry in action.

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**Thomas Chin**

**New Zealand Grain and Seed Trade Association**

Some had never had a direct presentation from the NZGSTA.

Chin accepts that trying to interest a person in the beauty of seed research isn't always the easiest.

But he's determined to engage non-farming people beyond a passing interest in Fonterra.

To be fair, there was a reasonable awareness in central government because there are a number of farmers involved in politics. But Chin's job is to give arable an easier run in more specific areas, like trade access, biosecurity, and seed property rights.

"Our grain and seed issues are

stifling a sales channel that was worth about \$6 million annually.

Canterbury grows, processes and exports most of this country's brassica seed, so Chin is surrounded by reminders of the value of the crop. He is part of a group working with Ministry for Primary Industries on procedures to satisfy Chinese regulators.

"For us in the seed industry it's a significant market," he said. "Being locked out of that for a couple of years means our competitors are getting a bit of an advantage and the longer we are kept out of that market the harder it will be to break in."

Plans are being made for a Chinese delegation to visit NZ in spring to see brassica field work, sprays, and other treatments. The logistics of the trip were well advanced, Chin said.

"I think once the trip has occurred and officials have time to digest our processes, we do expect that early 2015 we'll get the green light for trade to resume."

Success like that would reinforce NZ's position in Asian markets, where a bulging middle class is buying higher-value vegetables, just as it is in the meat and dairy sectors.

Chin, a product of market gardeners, is now comfortable enough in the arable sector to offer a vegetable analogy.

"Today they [Chinese consumers] might be having just half a bok choy."

"Well, imagine what the potential is if they have a whole one or two on their dinner plate, what that might mean for the seed industry."

The clamp on valuable seed products like bok choy and long bok has been in place in 2011,