

HORTINET: Meeting the Information Needs of the Horticulture Industry for Global Competitiveness¹

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. Background on the Formulation of SETUP

The Department of Science and Technology (DOST) has as one of its mandates the formulation and implementation of policies, plans, programs, and projects for the promotion of scientific and technological activities. Likewise, the DOST ensures that results of these endeavors are properly applied and utilized to further accelerate the country's economic and social development.

The modernization of the production sector through technology transfer is one strategy that the DOST pursues to help stimulate the country's economic growth. And these functions are carried out nationwide via the DOST's Regional Offices, their Provincial Science and Technology Centers, and Councils such as the Los Baños-based Philippine Council for Agriculture, Forestry and Natural Resources Research and Development (PCARRD). PCARRD is mandated to coordinate and monitor the national agriculture, forestry, and natural resources research and development programs.

Technology transfer in the regions is implemented in various programs covering a wide range of industry sectors. It also involves assistance of firms from the small to medium size, that monitoring of effectiveness and impacts of technology transfer has become an overwhelming task. Hence, as one intervention, the DOST formulated the Small Enterprises Technology Upgrading Program or SETUP.

SETUP aims to further promote countrywide development by raising the productivity of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) through technology application/upgrading with interventions focused on five industry sectors, namely: 1) Food Processing; 2) Furniture; 3) Fashion Accessories: Gifts-Toys-House wares; 4) Marine and Aquatic Resources; and 5) Horticulture. The SETUP rationalizes the implementation of such programs by consolidating the components of existing programs already implemented in the regions and have the 15 Regional Offices manage and/or implement these programs. Details of SETUP programs and services can be accessed through the website <http://www.setup.dost.gov.ph>.

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B. The Creation of HORTINET

In 2002, a series of consultations with the Regional Offices and relevant research and development institutes (RDIs) came about to identify industry sectors that SETUP will focus on. In these consultations, the horticulture industry was identified as one of the priority industry sectors as DOST affirms the horticulture industry's major contributions to the Philippine economy.

The department aims to contribute to the government's efforts of promoting the horticulture industry via technology interventions specifically on technical assistance and services. To facilitate the delivery of information and technologies, SETUP makes use of the web. Accordingly, promoting horticulture development through the web was facilitated with the creation of the Horticulture Information Network (HORTINET) starting in Mindanao through the DOST/SETUP-funded project "Information and Communication Systems Development for the Horticulture Industry in Mindanao". HORTINET was patterned from the Mango Information Network (MIN) (<http://www.min.pcarrd.dost.gov.ph>) which PCARRD pioneered in 1997 through the DOST/UNDP Gain Export (GAINEX) program.

II. THE HORTINET PROJECT

A. HORTINET Website Objectives

The Horticulture Information Network or HORTINET is a one-stop-information-site aimed at addressing the various information needs of the stakeholders of the horticulture industry. Its main objective is to operationalize a sustainable and relevant information service for the horticulture stakeholders, featuring products initially on some fruits, ornamentals, and vegetables. Specifically, it aims to 1) source, package, and disseminate information according to the needs of the horticulture stakeholders; and 2) formulate strategy to sustain HORTINET services.

B. Main Features/Implementation

On July 2002, PCARRD through its Executive Director, Dr. Patricio S. Faylon, spearheaded the implementation of the HORTINET project in close collaboration with the Mindanao DOST Regional Offices and the Central Visayas Information Sharing Network Foundation, Inc. or CVISNET/DOST Region VII. PCARRD serves as the central processing node and hosts the HORTINET website. On the other hand, the MINDADOST operates as satellite nodes which collects/transmits local data to PCARRD and attends to the information needs of stakeholders in the area. The CVISNET serves as back-up host of the HORTINET website. Both PCARRD and MINDADOST continuously undertake data collection/processing and serve as access points for online and walk-in clients. In 2004, the HORTINET project was expanded nationwide involving the cooperation of Luzon and Visayas DOST Regional Offices.

Initially, the HORTINET project covered fruits such as mango, banana, papaya, durian, and pineapple. At present, it has expanded to include rambutan, strawberry, and calamansi. Likewise, vegetables which originally focused on tomato, carrots, and potato was expanded to include bell pepper, broccoli, cabbage, Chinese cabbage, garden peas, and snap beans. For ornamentals, orchids, cutflowers, and cutfoliage are the main plant groups included. The expansion was based on clients' feedback from the regions.

C. Website Services: Why Access the Web?

Just like the MIN, the HORTINET website benefits numerous stakeholders in the horticulture industry in many ways. These beneficiaries may include growers/cooperatives, exporters, traders, processors, buyers, input suppliers, experts, and other stakeholders. As much as possible, the HORTINET project tries to address the various information requirements of each group mentioned which could be made available and accessed in the website. To further make it easier for stakeholders to obtain information they need on horticulture, the information services the website initially offers are categorized into seven as follows:

1. *Technology Information Service* - information on production and post-production technologies are posted here. Know the best available techniques and methods for growing ornamentals, for producing quality fruits and vegetables, and for proper packaging and transporting of these crops. Growers/producers, researchers, and practically anyone interested are just a click away to a wide range of technologies and other knowledge-based information collated from PCARRD's national R&D network. We also have subject matter specialists on horticulture at PCARRD which will attend to your queries on production and post-production technologies;
2. *Market Information Service* – secondary historical data/statistics on production area, volume and yield, number of trees, prices, and/or export/import data are contained here sourced from mandated government agencies. Information is presented in summary form for the whole Philippines, as well as, per region for each crop;
3. *Directory Information Service* - key players of horticulture industries are listed here, including brief profiles of those willing to be posted. Pool of experts for each main group can be found with their specific field of expertise indicated. Stakeholders may communicate directly to the experts for specific queries and requirements. Likewise, experts can exchange notes with fellow experts on particular topics of interest or concerns;
4. *Research and Development Information Service* - updates on horticulture projects conducted in the Philippines can be found here. Stakeholders will learn ongoing or completed state-of-the-art researches that may be related or significant to their undertakings in the horticulture industry. Relevant developments in horticulture R&D are available for browsing and research. We also have program specialists on horticulture at PCARRD which will answer queries on matters related to R&D undertakings;

5. *Bazaar Information Service* - virtual meeting place for information exchange through chatting and email exchange can be achieved here. For stakeholders who are very much active to participate in upcoming events for whichever three main groups--fruits, ornamentals, and vegetables--details can be accessed here. Similarly, messages, ads, and updates from interested stakeholders may be posted here. Stakeholders get the latest news/events through this information service;
6. *E-Library (Communication Media) Service* – virtual library of the horticulture industry. Listings and corresponding synopses for existing and newly published books, manuals, brochures, and other print media can be found here. This includes PCARRD publication products on horticulture production available for sale. Whether for thesis references or for actual application in the farms, numerous publications can be accessed, with links included to further details and contact persons for specific publication; and
7. *Policy Information Service* - provides information on government policies and regulations relevant to the horticulture industry. Significantly, the stakeholders can be more proactive and highly participative to the development of the industry if they are more ‘learned’ of policy issues and laws affecting them, especially with regards to global competitiveness.

Virtually, the HORTINET website serves as a “garden of knowledge” to many information needs of various stakeholders of the horticulture industry that makes it the very reason why horticulture practitioners should access the website. And we encourage feedback so we can improve the contents and presentation of the website as well as the technical services that it will offer.

D. Access/Directory

Clients can access the HORTINET website practically anywhere from any computer with Internet connection at any time of the day seven days a week. Hence, stakeholders would only need to go to the nearest Internet-connected computers and the website <http://www.hortinet.pcarrd.dost.gov.ph> is just a mouse’ click away.

Aside from the web, information or queries about the HORTINET project can also be easily accessed from the DOST Regional Offices nationwide through walk-in visits, telephone, fax, and e-mail. Queries and other requests may also be sent to the HORTINET Central Node at PCARRD, Los Baños, Laguna through Tel. Nos.: (049) 536-0014 to 0020, Fax Nos.: (049) 536-0016, and E-mail: p.faylon@pcarrd.dost.gov.ph or hortinet@pcarrd.dost.gov.ph.

The directory of contact persons for each region is made available in the directory service menu of the website. An electronic version of the HORTINET leaflet is also made available for a brief orientation of the HORTINET project.

III. CONCLUSION

For a country to be globally competitive, its various industry sectors should become one. And becoming globally competitive requires not just a portion of an industry but an effort of the whole industry to achieve it.

The Horticulture industry of the Philippines has taken off towards achieving global competitiveness. What with proofs of its fruit, ornamental, and vegetable sectors already gaining an export market in the past recent years. However, this sector has still so much to do to sustain if not improve its global market share.

The HORTINET project, with its main feature-the HORTINET website, was created to help boost the global competitiveness of the horticulture industry. With its implementation, the horticulture industry and its stakeholders are expected to be better linked and create vital networks necessary to support the industry for high quality production, packaging, and transport among others, which are acceptable with the international markets notwithstanding the needs of the domestic market.

The challenges that the project faces at present are the improvement and updating of the website to have the necessary information required of each services and how to sustain this. It is hoped that, with full cooperation of all the stakeholders in the horticulture industry, the dream of becoming globally competitive and sustaining it will just be a reality soon.