

Insecticide maker Bio-Gene in search of global partners



Bio-Gene chief executive Richard Jagger. Picture: Stuart McEvoy

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Australian agtech minnow Bio-Gene Technology is lining up potential global partners as it progresses its technology to tackle insects that are damaging crops and spreading disease.

Chief executive Richard Jagger told *The Weekend Australian* that his company had started to engage with several companies globally that could help Bio-Gene commercialise its technology.

The listed company has developed a patent-protected technology that it says could offer a new range of safe, effective insecticides. Bio-Gene's products include Qcide, an oil extracted from the leaves of an Australian eucalypt, and Flavocide, a chemically synthesised product.

"When we talk about a novel mode of action, it is how the chemical works in the body of the insect or the pest to control it," Mr Jagger said.

“The good thing about being derived from nature is, we have a natural existing product and the technology to synthesise some of these molecules and produce them on larger scales for certain applications.”

Mr Jagger said the company had money in the bank and a testing program in place to understand where the value proposition of its technology was, in terms of what markets and pests it should focus on.

“We are still a couple of years away from having anything that can be commercialised, but now is the time to develop relationships with commercial companies,” he said. “Over the years we have been working on how we gain momentum in getting interest in how this technology could be applied in the marketplace.”

Mr Jagger said the industry was screaming out for new products as insects developed resistance for insecticides. But he said finding new solutions was difficult given about 140,000 molecules needed to be screened to find one with promise.

“Finding something like we have with this novel mode of action is quite significant,” he said.

“The bigger companies will try to incorporate these programs in their R&D spend, but obviously with a hit rate of one in 140,000 it is high risk. It’s often little companies like ours that come across technology.”

Bio-Gene, which listed on the ASX in November, is focused on addressing insecticide resistance in the areas of crop protection, animal health and public health.

The company, advised by former Nufarm boss Doug Rathbone, is developing products to attack insects that damage agricultural crops, and insects that affect animals, such as fleas and ticks in cattle.

Addressing major public health issues that spread via mosquitoes, such as zika virus and Dengue fever, are also in Bio-Gene’s sights.

Mr Jagger said while the biggest market, in terms of value, was crop production, public health was a significant target.

“Public health and control of mosquitoes are becoming a problem globally and scientists are concerned about how they control mosquitoes when they have no effective chemistry anymore,” he said. “We are hoping to get traction in government groups and NGOs, as well as commercial companies to see how the technology could benefit that sector.”

The company grows the trees for its products in far north Queensland and Mr Jagger said Bio-Gene worked with a “terrific bunch” of farmers who were excited about innovation.

“They love to roll up their sleeves and play a part in advancing agriculture,” he said.

“The technology is not just high level scientists with lots of wonderful equipment — it’s all the way through to the farm gate. It means we have people on the spot who can change a piece of equipment to better harvest a crop and create innovative solutions that help us produce the product we need.”

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