



# FARMING FOR THE FUTURE

Sustainable Business Magazine speaks with Mike Frank, CEO of UPL Corporation, about how UPL is harnessing technology to transform the global agricultural industry.

**UPL** is an international provider of sustainable agricultural solutions. It was established in India in 1969 and over more than 50 years has grown to become the world's fifth largest agricultural solutions company. Today it has a global reach extending into more than 138 countries, with access to more than 90% of the world's food basket. Nonetheless, UPL is not resting on its laurels.

## FROM INDIA TO THE WORLD

Mike Frank, CEO of UPL Corporation, describes where the company is today and how it's leveraging that to tackle some of the world's most pressing issues:

"We offer a full range of sustainable agricultural products and solutions spanning high performing seeds, biosolutions, traditional crop protection products, pre- and post-harvest solutions, and soil and water technologies – each of which helps farmers overcome their challenges, and grow healthy crops. We have 44 manufacturing facilities so we're very much back-integrated ►





“First is food sustainability. We want to make sure everyone across the planet has access to secure and nutritious food. Second is economic and social sustainability, especially for growers around the world. In order for farmers to really focus on sustainability and regenerative agriculture, we need incentives for them to adopt these practices. Third is environmental sustainability. Our work must contribute to a healthier planet and ensure that agriculture supports global decarbonisation efforts.”

One way that UPL is embodying these values is through its work with women in Africa.

“We recognise that women play a critical role in farming, and yet their valuable contribution is often not acknowledged resulting in unequal pay. This problem is particularly acute in emerging economies, such as Africa, where pervasive gender inequalities persist, affecting women’s ability to access land, financing, markets, training and education. One of the ways in which we are helping tackle this issue is through our partnership with organisations like UN Women and Farm Africa in Tanzania. Working together, we have built a program aimed at improving livelihoods, educating female farmers on sustainable management of natural resources, and helping to build communities more resilient to climate change. We want to ensure that women are treated fairly and that they too can become part of the solution, part of inclusive economic development, and



ultimately help generate positive growth for the agriculture sector.”

Another example is the way that UPL helps farmers globally get to grips with new technology.

“We have a stewardship programme called Applique Bem. It’s all about training applicators – mostly farmers – on how to spray more safely for them and their op-

erators,” explains Mr. Frank. “It also trains them to only put on as much product as is needed on a field. This is a training program that we’ve done in South America with over 70,000 farmers and applicators. It really is, I think, the gold standard in how you train farmers to use products and technologies in the safest, most sustainable way.”

Taking social, economic and environmental solutions as three parts of a whole then finding solutions that service all the whole is not only desirable today but a necessity. The world is changing and it’s changing quickly, and building resilience is key.

“We’ve seen how fragile the world’s food supply chain is. Recent events have shown this,” Mr. Frank continues. “The floods in Pakistan and parts of Asia, or this summer’s extreme heat and drought in both North America and Europe, have had major impacts on global food supplies. Of course the ►



as a company. We don’t just buy products from somebody and sell them. Due to our history, most of our back-integration is in India, which makes us unique in a world where most ag-input companies are based in or supplied from China. We also have 25 R&D facilities and over 14,000 registrations so as a company we have access to a wide range of technology and innovation.

“This deep investment in technology, paired with our Indian heritage, has put us in an excellent position to work with smallholder farmers around the world. India has a very large agricultural base but most of the farmers are small-scale, as is the case in many of the regions in which we now operate. Since the beginning of our journey, and throughout our growth, we’ve focused uniquely on developing and distributing technologies and solutions suited to smallholder farming communities. For example

In India, and to a lesser extent in parts of Africa and South East Asia, growers typically burn their paddy stubble in winter months as a quick and efficient way of clearing fields before planting wheat crop. But burning this stubble releases a lot of carbon into the atmosphere, with a hazardous impact on public health outcomes, and also depletes soil nutrients. So last year through our ag-tech subsidiary nurture.farm we launched the Crop Residue Management program, partnering with the Indian Agricultural Research Institute to make available to farmers a bio-decomposer which breaks the stubble down so it doesn’t need to be burned, and deployed 700 boom sprayers to service their land free of charge.

“In the first year of the program we enrolled 25,000 farmers across 420,000 acres in northern India for this service and it was extremely successful. We saw 92% farmer

compliance, over 1 million tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions prevented, and farmers found that, by returning the carbon into the soil, they had richer and healthier soils that helped create better crops this year.”

### THREE VALUES

As a world-leading company that’s involved from the start to the end of the agricultural industry’s supply chain, UPL understands how important holistic solutions are for not only farmers but the world at large. Technology plays an important role in this but it’s not the only instrument that UPL uses, as its core values reveal.

“We believe in order to solve today’s food security challenges and help decarbonise the planet we need to look at agriculture from an end-to-end standpoint,” explains Mr. Frank. “We have three core pillars that underline this.





war in Ukraine has had a detrimental effect on global movement of grains too. Looking a little further back, Covid-19 was also very disruptive to supply chains. All of these events have helped everyone understand that the global food system is fragile. At UPL we're focused on how to deliver resilience from the start to the end of the supply chain."

**CLIMATE GOAL SCORING**

UPL recognises that agriculture plays a central role in the climate crisis that the world faces. But it also knows that, because of this, it can play a major role in tackling the crisis.

"If you look at agriculture as an industry, it produces about 30% of the greenhouse gas emissions in the world," Mr. Frank points out. "If we can reduce the industry's greenhouse gas emissions, and advance methods to capture existing atmospheric carbon, we could have a huge impact in tackling climate change. We see infinite possibilities for climate-positive agriculture, which restores balance and ensures that food systems not only feed our growing population, but also nourish and safeguard our planet. There are historic farming techniques as well as new technologies that allow farmers to take carbon out of the atmosphere and store it in the soil as carbon organic matter. This opportunity is real, it's measurable. But to harness this momentous opportunity, we all need to ensure that farmers are rewarded for adopting these new practices because ultimately the benefits will be felt by society as a whole.

One way that UPL is helping to advance agriculture's role in fighting the climate crisis and reward farmers for the vital contribution is through the Gigaton Carbon Goal.

"Our Gigaton Carbon Goal is a global series of initiatives that harness sustainable agricultural practices to reduce atmospheric carbon dioxide by 1bn metric tonnes, or a gigaton, by 2040. The goal materialised from an ambition to go beyond our own corporate commitment to reduce carbon emissions and achieve carbon neutrality by 2040, but to also work with global farming communities to help capture carbon emissions already in our atmosphere," explains Mr. Frank.

UPL is undertaking the Gigaton Carbon Goal together with the FIFA Foundation.

"We believe tackling the world's biggest issues – such as the climate crisis – requires innovative thinking and unique solutions. Our approach is led by our OpenAg purpose – partnering with like-minded stakeholders with complementary approaches and mutual goals to unlock outcomes that no single actor could achieve on their own. We have therefore partnered with the FIFA Foundation through the Gigaton Carbon Goal, combining our agricultural offering and distribution network with their global platform to educate and excite people about the role sustainable agriculture can play in decarbonising our planet. Our partnership will also help promote to existing and future farmers the systems that allow them to sequester carbon, contribute to net zero goals, and improve their livelihoods.

"The Gigaton Carbon Goal is currently in its pilot phase, and in the coming years additional pilots and projects will be launched across the world with the target of reaching 100 million hectares. As the Gigaton Carbon Goal continues to grow and enter new regions, we are taking into consideration the unique circumstances of each country to ►





build an ecosystem of partners that bring together and promote technologies, interventions, and effective services and solutions. We are also working with carbon certification bodies to create and validate emission carbon credits and fairly reward farmers for their sustainable practices.”

**EMERGING SOLUTIONS**

Looking forward, Mr. Frank is keen to point out that UPL succeeds not through gatekeeping its practices but by learning from and adapting the work of other successful companies:

“We have a legacy of over 50 years and have grown up through both organic growth and through acquisitions. There’s been over 40 acquisitions through the course of our history and they’ve allowed us to consolidate and build skills and technologies as well as give us access to more farmers around the world.

“Today we are the world’s leader in manufacturing and selling what’s broadly considered as biosolutions. This is an area of our business where we’re doing a lot of our own R&D. Through our OpenAg network, we are working with technology

providers across the world to scale our work and deepen our impact. This includes start-ups and universities from North America to Europe that are developing new technologies and cultivating research, and we are able to provide global regulatory support and commercialisation opportunities to help get their innovations into the hands of farmers who need them the most. The new technologies that these small start-ups and research centres are producing will play a vital role in future of sustainable agriculture and we are proud to be supporting them.” □



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