



Informed Decisions

softening the hard times and strengthening the good times

Anyone who knows farming knows that it is made up of both the good times and the hard times. There can never be enough of the good times and there seem to be too many hard times. Success is reliant upon farmers meeting the challenges posed by drought, flood, fire, pest and disease pressures, climatic extremes, weed infestation, fluctuations in global commodity markets and ever increasing government and community expectations. The days of a fair price for a fair product seem a thing of the past: farming is a ruthless business and farmers tasting success are those who are tackling these challenges head on through informed farm business management.

We all know of progressive farmers who are forever seeking new solutions to age old problems, and it is true that to meet many of these modern challenges farmers need to reflect on current practices and take the time to consider how we can be more resilient, efficient, and better informed. What needs to be done to allow us to better cope with those hard times and to seize the opportunities on offer in the good times?

In my experience, those who find success within farming are those who plan well ahead, perhaps diversify, draw upon science and information, share knowledge and innovation, and recognise that farming is a modern business as well as a valued lifestyle.

A modern farmer must always be monitoring the radar screen, taking into account potential business risks, and also scanning for potential opportunities

to improve practices or to better meet the needs of customers. In an industry where 70% of produce is directed towards global markets the impact of political decisions and consumer sentiment can hit hard and fast. Likewise, business opportunities emerge rapidly and farmers must be responsive in taking advantage of these. While Australian farmers have proved their ability to survive and prosper under tough conditions, there is no doubt that we can all do better.

There are countless examples of farmers who have failed to prepare for or anticipate downturns in production – the price of failure can be immeasurable. The “hard times” can waste time, energy and money, and place huge emotional pressure on relationships and families, but in many cases there are warning signs and hard times can be predicted.

While modern science and market forecasts can provide advice on potential threats to a farm business it is true that even the best managers can get caught out. When tackling the harshest drought on record, in the aftermath of a fire, or even under the pressures of political change, it is tough to make objective decisions on what is best from a business point of view. However, in the face of adversity it is those farmers that make informed decisions that are more likely to see it through and take control of their destiny. These decisions are not easy, whether to de-stock in order to persist through a drought, to hold back on planting to avoid crop failure, or in the worst instance to leave the farm; but these decisions must be made. When faced with such questions, a farmer is not alone. There is a wealth of information, support and advice readily available.

As the saying goes in farm business, a good farmer may not be always able to get it right all the time, but it is the farmer who gets most of it right most of the time that will help ensure agricultural industries remain proud and strong.

This publication and accompanying CD-Rom titled “Good Times Hard Times” aims to outline some of the opportunities available to farmers considering their business management options. Opportunities to obtain decent training, to access information on alternate farm management strategies, and to meet with other farmers and to share ideas.

“Good Times Hard Times” presents stories of real Australian farmers and their experiences, good and bad, and some of the approaches they have applied in overcoming the many challenges of farm business. The stories represent but a few of the many farmers who are facing similar challenges to yours on a daily basis, and it is through your state farming organisation that it will be possible to share knowledge and experience among members. State farm organisations also have experienced staff on hand to provide advice or to refer members in the right direction on many issues. Take the time to share your issues and help to ensure that your views are taken into account at all levels of government, ultimately helping to ensure that Government policy is farm friendly policy.

I genuinely hope the information in this publication can help you reconsider how your farm business operates, helping your enterprise persist through the hard times and savour the good times.

All the best

Wayne Cornish.

Wayne Cornish operates a mixed farming enterprise near Gumeracha in South Australia, with interests in sheep, cropping, potatoes and cherries. He has held the position of Vice President of the National Farmers Federation for 6 years and Chaired a number of NFF's policy committees. Wayne represents Australian farmers on the National Rural Advisory Committee and is a strong advocate for quality training and professional human resource management practices. He currently chairs Rural Skills Australia and ChemCert Australia and is Deputy Chair of the Rural Training Council of Australia.

This magazine, the website and CD have been developed with resources from the AAA- FarmBis program run by AFFA, from the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation (RIRDC) and from Rural Skills Australia. Such partnerships are important to the farm sector – the support from government is vital (as much as we want more and at times want it delivered differently, we still cannot function without that support) and the expertise provided from our R&D corporations often leads the way to new practices and new products. “RIRDC is a very proactive and flexible organisation that provides professional and useful information for farmers – they should be used more often.”



◀ Wayne Cornish – taking a breather on his farm in South Australia – advocates a professional approach to farm business management