

A Farmer's Perspective

I would like to begin with a very quick Geography lesson. Australia, Western Australia. In the south west of Western Australia is the capital city Perth. 420 kilometres to the north of Perth is the port city of Geraldton. Geraldton is the most northern port for the cropping area in Western Australia and is the port for the Northern Agricultural area of WA. Inland from Geraldton is the Shire of Morawa. Morawa is on the eastern extremity of the cropping area and includes pastoral land on its eastern boundary. To the west of Morawa is the Shire of Mingenew. We farm land that lies between the towns of Morawa and Mingenew in the locality of Merkanooka.

In an email I received from GRDC which highlighted this conference they said in part that *"This is your opportunity to hear from ABARE analysts, industry leaders and international speakers at key sessions"* Since I'm not an ABARE analysts and not an international speaker I guess I've just been elevated to an industry leader.

If you read my bio you may have wondered why someone with my qualifications is farming. It's quite simple really. I married a farmer.

My husband, Tony, has now been farming for nearly 50 years having been bought home from school to run the farm when his father suffered a heart attack. (His father did survive and went on to live for many more years). I on the other hand was city born, bred and educated, but couldn't wait to undertake the adventure of being in the country and living on a farm. Apart from teaching there was little scope for a Physics degree in rural Morawa, so I learnt how to become a farmer's wife (with all the associated tasks that that term implies). I still grin when I recall being a new bride taking lunches to my husband who was harvesting using a Chamberlain 306 with no cab and a tug-a-long harvester. No cab means of course no air-conditioning, plenty of dust, plenty of heat and loads of chaff. For protection from the sun he had a beach umbrella up shading the seat. Although I only remember carting wheat in bulk (well an International truck with an 8 tonne load was bulk haulage back then) we still loaded our seed and fertiliser into a combine, from bags.

Last year I heard a Queensland farmer say *"If you're doing what your Grandfather was doing then you need to change."* When I tried to discuss all of the changes we had made since his grandfather's time with Tony (his grandfather settled the original farm in Morawa in 1911) he, being Tony, commented that his grandfather tilled the earth, he planted the seed to grow his crops, he mended his fences to keep his stock in, he climbed windmills to repair them, he produced wool and meat for the market, so what of real importance had altered. So it is not what we are doing but how we are doing it that has changed.

We have now moved on to a self-propelled harvester and a semi to cart the grain (when we produce it) and from tandem combines to an airseeder and bar.

Have you ever noticed that all these good changes seem to cost a lot of money?

In our business we have gone through a few drastic changes over the last ten years. I not only married a farmer, but also married into a farming family. The working relationship we had with my husband's family became a partnership between his brother and sister-in-law and us after the death of his father. The way the property was farmed altered greatly when my brother-in-law took on the practice of bio-dynamic farming. Tony had said that he would allow his brother to trial this type of farming in one paddock, but this eventually spread to over half the area we farmed. I was aware of Rudolf Steiner's theories, but I had a belief that we were farming as a business and therefore should make a profit from our activities (given the right seasonal conditions of course). The bio-dynamic side of our business actually budgeted for a loss.

The differences in the ideology of farming practices eventually lead to discord. We wanted to get our crops in the ground as quickly as possible after breaking rains and felt inconvenienced when we had to move properties because 'the moon was in the right phase'. My sons hated having to drive at no more than 4 mph when working the bio-dynamic land and the cost of feed additives for stock, due to the lack of nutrition in the pastures, was astronomical. Yes, the expenses on the fertiliser and chemical side of the ledger were greatly reduced, but so were yields. With the farming techniques in the 90's it seemed to me that only cropping ¼ of the arable land each year was a waste of a valuable asset. Remembering that this was during 90's we should have been progressing in leaps and bounds rather than stagnating or even receding.

Eventually the need to split the partnership was overwhelming. My husband and his brother had always worked as a very amicable team as their skills complimented each other, but there was definite tension between the wives which then impacted on the men. Consequently the resulting split was distressing for all concerned. It was a difficult time to dissolve the partnership as we were suffering some poor production years. 2002 was terrible and with the final settlement in 2003 we had been left with a very large debt. We now farm with our son, Zakary and also Anja.

We did have hopes that with hard work and astute decisions we would quickly reduce the debt we had taken on, but the weather conditions have not been conducive to this.

How have we coped over the preceding dry years? Zak always says to me that I shouldn't say that we were having a tough time as there are many farmers worse off than us. Farmers to the east of us have had things tougher, but we have still had to cope with the stress of less rain, reduced areas cropped, reduced yields or complete failures in those crops planted, less feed, reduced stock numbers and the ever present increasing debt. Until October last year we were not in a drought declared area, so the following figures aren't official results of the drought. We have had decreased rainfall over the past few years especially during the growing season but as you will see from the Bureau of Meteorology map we do normally farm in a low rainfall area.

Since 2002 we have had to heavily reduce stock numbers including all of our hoggets in 2006. Zak was very reluctant to let the hoggets go as he has been breeding for Multipurpose Merinos for a few years and that was a whole year of his breeding lost. He even offered to sell his motorbike to buy feed, if it enabled us to keep the hoggets. It was just as bad last year when he had to reduce his hogget numbers by 50%.

Reduced sheep numbers also means a reduced clip with our wool production falling dramatically.

As we also run cattle we were forced to quit all our 2006 progeny and some of our breeding herd. Mind you the cattle are a point of discord on our property, with Tony finding unlimited merit in them and Zak seeing only the many facets on the downside. It has been heard that "The next vehicle to leave the farm after Dad's hearse will be the cattle truck!" or "I wish Dad would find another hobby apart from cattle!" Unfortunately we are trying to quit the majority of our cattle, but market prices are making this difficult. We were offered just \$500 a head for cows with calves at foot.

Cropping has in the past constituted 80 to 85% of our income. The past years have fluctuated both in the areas of crop we have been able to plant against our budgeted cropping area and the yields we have managed to achieve from the crops planted.

It is only some innovations (for example press wheels or short season varieties of wheat) that have enabled us to achieve the results we have.

Unfortunately the future seasons will hold many complications for us to address. Not least is the increased debt we have accumulated over the past seasons. Our micro concerns include our pastures that will have to be re-established as they have been decimated, the

seed bank of weeds that will be more difficult to control, the sky-rocketing price of the chemical for weed control and of fertiliser and diesel and we will need to undertake a stock increase programme, to name but a few; while the macro concerns such as coping with the demise of the AWB as we have known it, learning to market our grains on the world stage with all the associated risks that brings with it, competing in a world market to sell our produce against competitors who are heavily subsidised by their governments, climate change, dealing in carbon credits and quality accreditation; all this along with normal business pressures of interest rate rises, fluctuating government policies, inflationary influences, brings additional stressful demands when we are currently concentrating on survival.

Earlier I mention Anja as part of our farming structure.

Anja is employed by us on a 457 Long Stay Visa. Her Visa is for a period of four years. It gives her freedom to travel in and out of Australia during that time which is fantastic as she is able to go back to visit family in Europe as she wants.

Anja is our 'working man'. During seeding Zak does the spraying and Anja operates the seeding equipment. She is also fantastic at any task we give her, quickly learning how to be a roustabout, feed stock, do fencing (she has done kilometres of that) actually any normal task that a farmer would do. She can also operate all of our equipment, which has exceeded my capabilities.

This highlights two points that could be considered in future farming. Firstly never reject a female worker because she is female, or not muscle bound. The equipment on a farm these days allows for even the slightest person to work competently. Secondly with the drain on available workforce due to mining boom and the population shift from rural areas; the 457 Visa is an alternative.

Remembering the earlier comment that *"If you're doing what your Grandfather was doing then you need to change"* reminds me of the sayings on our farm.

Tony (Dad) will come in and say to me *"Bloody Zak, he never listens to what I say. I tell him how to do something and he goes and does it another way."*

Zak in turn will lament *"Bloody Dad, just because his done it that way all his life doesn't mean it's the right way!"*

Yes perspectives are changing and it is a challenge for us more mature farmers to adjust to these changes and make the future of farming for our sons and daughters not only profitable but also enjoyable – with the occasional challenge. Farming is not only a business but it is a way of life and hopefully we can pass on to the next generation the necessary tools to be successful farmers but also importantly, successful at life. When topics relating to farming are discussed, it is often forgotten that it is not only a business that is being affected but families. Unlike in businesses that are associated with farming, after a days work we don't get to go home, because work is home is work. Any decision taken has a resultant effect on the family.

It is our ambition to pass our farm onto the next generation. Zak is now the 4th generation of Valentine's farming at Morawa. Having four children we were mindful to offer them all a chance to work on the farm. I insisted that they all had tertiary educations so that they had other alternatives to 'just coming home to the farm because it was there'. Once our daughters began studying and living in Perth they didn't want to return to live 'in the bush'. Our eldest son has degrees in Agriculture and Business, but chose to work with the Department of Agriculture and Food in WA, so it was only Zak who wanted to farm. We have taken the step to discuss our plans with all our children as people could say that Zak is being favoured by inheriting the farming properties (although he does have an ownership in some of them already). The other children have been provided for in many ways and as I do remind people, Zak will also be inheriting the debt. However we seem to be just marking time at present with our future plans as we wait, and let's hope it's not in vain, for some better times to return.

Zakary has had a good education from his father in the basics of farming, machine repairs and maintenance. Both Zak and Anja are part of the Morawa Farm Improvement Group and have been involved in many innovative projects including the deep drain on Rod Madden's farm and the resulting Seaweed Project on both Madden's farm and the Tubby Families property. The plan is to investigate if seaweed *gracilaria chilensis* can be grown in ponds that result from the draining of saline ground waters from salt affected lands.

Zak & Anja always undertake pasture, plant or weed trials on several sections of the property each year in conjunction with agronomists, Dept of Ag, UWA or GRDC. They try to attend as many information events, field days and update sessions as is practical and for light reading tend to read the *FarmWEEKLY* or weekly editions emailed from bodies such as Department of Ag; WAFarmers or CBH.

Anja and I tend to think that we get caught in the conflict between father and son with their differing ideas on the way to undertake tasks, but I can say that I have no doubts that Zak, if left on his own now, would manage the farm well. I do, however, have severe doubts about the bookkeeping side of the business.

Thank you