

SA Farmer

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GROUP MEDIA

SUMMER 2023



**Brad's Medtec
journey set to
culminate**

Page 15

**Justin's potato
passion**

Page 46

**The Barossa
Valley's dried
fruit empire**

Page 38



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Welcome to SA Farmer, summer 2023 edition

Four times a year, the hard-working Taylor Group Media team of journalists based in the Riverland and Lower North produce SA Farmer.

Within these pages each quarter, we tell the stories of home and hobby farmers, business owners and primary producers.

The 2023 summer edition starts with an insight into a 40-year passion for food and sustainability in Gawler, fresh asparagus grown in Renmark North, Australia's biggest glasshouse in Two Wells, and the Riverland's touch into medicinal cannabis.

Agricultural news at a state and national level in this edition includes changes to the agricultural workforce, the chance impact on research priorities, grower options amid fertiliser shortages, staying

road-safe during harvest season, livestock eID rebates, protective netting subsidies and more.

Rounding out the feature stories for the year have us reading about the Riverland's own Bee Lady and her challenges as a small-scale beekeeper in Renmark, a family's 117 years of Lameroo dryland farming, the (many) fruits produced by a backyard farming pair, collaborative farming and a legacy to be proud of outside of Loxton, a dried fruit empire and ethical farming out of the Barossa, and one man's passion for potatoes in Taylorville.

Four industry experts give their updates on stone fruits, almonds, wine grapes, and citrus for this time of year.

Summerfruit Australia board

member Jason size talks fruit development and weather challenges; Almond Board of Australia CEO Tim Jackson quality and volume and tree health; Wine Grape Council of SA's Adrian Hoffman talks vine health ahead of the next vintage and restrictions; and Citrus SA chair Mark Doecke discusses current harvests and input costs.

The publication would not be what it is without the added support of advertisers, and the production team behind the scenes.

We hope you enjoy the 2023 summer edition of SA Farmer. Have a wonderful end to your year and we'll see you again in 2024.

Until then, keep updated online by visiting our free-to-read website: www.safarmer.com.au

- Elyse Armanini, SA Farmer co-ordinator



Seed potato producer Justin DellaZoppa is aiming to improve the quality and sustainability of potatoes grown in Australia.

COVER PHOTO: supplied

SA Farmer

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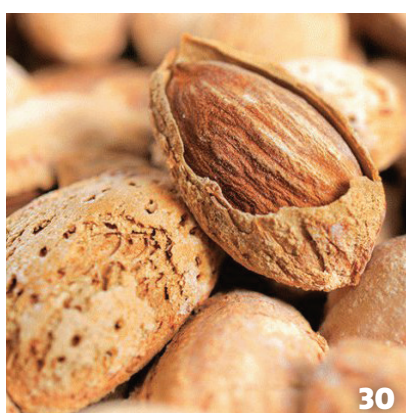
Paul McCormick

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INSIDE



6 Providing quality vegetables to the Riverland region

12 Tomatoes and cucumbers, grown to perfection

16 Ag news

24 When life gives you bees, make honey

30 Industry experts

42 Local farmers raise the bar

Sowing sustainability: The Food Forest's eco-friendly farming revolution

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY ASHLEA MILLER-PICKERSGILL



ON a 15-hectare property in the heart of Gawler, The Food Forest grows an abundance of fresh fruit, vegetables, nuts, wine and produce, totalling almost 150 varieties of goodness.

And it is a sight to behold.

For the past 40 years, Graham and Annemarie Brookman have grown their passion for food, sustainability and caring for the planet.

These values have transferred into their work, ensuring the way The Food

Forest is run is as clean and as efficient as possible.

The pair have evolved over the past four decades, introducing new technologies and assets to their farm.

Upon returning to Australia after their global travel many decades ago, discovering permaculture changed Graham and Annemarie's lives and farming mindset forever.

"It's rather unusual that it's not a whole series of technologies... it's an attitude about how humans and the planet can get on together," Graham said.

"When you make any decision you would start with, is this good for the planet? Then you would say well, is it good for the community?"

"And then you would say well I better get on with doing something about it... they're sort of the three ethics that would inform any decision you make."

In recent years, the duo have made some big changes to their farm, all for the better.

Newly constructed hail and bird netting has proven a brilliant investment, with technology to catch any hail stones on the netting and drop them away from the plants.

This is vital when testing out a brand new fruit from overseas.

"Starting to use all of the technology we have at our disposal, like the move to scare birds with lasers and our new

growing area that are bird proof, hail proof, blocks fierce winds, improves the humidity, gives a bit of shade and acts as a trellis," Graham said.

"We can actually grow incredibly large crops of stone fruit, and in that we have got one of the new crops Australia is playing with: jujubes.

"They're also called Chinese dates.... when they're smallish and green they taste like a granny smith, when they're a bit bigger they're shiny, the size of a kiwi fruit, crunchy and sweet.

"And if you leave them hanging on the tree until they get really ripe and almost want to fall off, well then they look and taste like dates."

Graham and Annemarie do it all, constantly hard at work improving their passion and business.

And, they have now successfully

created a new breed of self-shedding sheep.

"Up until now we have been cross-breeding sheep to get that all sorted out, so this is the second year that we have actually mated our own breed with our own breed," Graham said.

"We are starting to get quite a few now."

With other matters on their minds, like the future of Gawler, the future of the earth and climate change, as well as the land becoming scarce in regional areas, Graham and Annemarie just hope to continue making the world a better place.

The pair often host school and university students, teaching them about permaculture, about how to run a farm sustainability, and that agriculture makes the world go around in one way or another.

It's an attitude about how humans and the planet can get on together.



Graham Brookman checking in on the jujubes under the newly constructed hail and bird netting.



Annemarie Brookman showing the pistachio tree and how it grows new limbs.



Bananas growing abundantly at The Food Forest.



Stone fruit called jujubes, growing happily underneath the hail and bird netting.

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Renee Horvath, and her son Lane, on their asparagus farm at Renmark North.

Providing quality vegetables to the Riverland

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY ALEXANDRA BULL

The Riverland is well-known for its thriving citrus and almond industries, but located at Renmark North is a small-but-bustling asparagus farm.

Going on 27 years, Renee Horvath and her family took over Renmark Asparagus from her brother-in-law last year.

Renee, who hails from Ballarat in Victoria, met her husband, who was born and raised in Renmark, in Melbourne, with the couple and their young family moving to the Riverland in March 2022.

"The niche of asparagus up here is really good, and it doesn't get affected by fruit fly, that's the really good

thing about it," Renee said.

"If you take good care of it you can keep the season going for nine months, so it's a pretty high-yield crop.

"I think if you just let it go and don't rake care of it, you might get three months, so it just depends on how you take care of it.

"It's all organic out here so we don't use any chemicals, pesticides or anything like that, which I find makes a difference to the quality of it. We pull all the weeds by hand too."

"We are in the process of expanding at the moment,

so we are seeding it at the moment and we have got a block out here, so we are going to plant some white asparagus and give that a go."

While the farm also grows apples, oranges and a variety of other fruits, the asparagus crop is the highest yield.

"I love working with my family. It's just nice to wake-up and pick asparagus when you want," Renee said.

"Having the freedom and go and pick it when I want at 12 noon instead of three in the afternoon, I can do that.



Freshly grown asparagus.

"It also tastes pretty good, so I like that. There's a lot of things you can do with it."

Asparagus is generally considered a temperate/cold climate plant, but it is easy to grow in a sub-tropical climate as it thrives on the rain and has no problems with pests or diseases.

"The climate in the Riverland is good, it needs to be pretty warm for it to grow well," Renee said.

"It grows really fast. It grows seven inches a day, so you have to pick it two to three times a day."

If unpicked daily, the texture of the asparagus will go woody, so Renee will usually pick every day by herself, but occasionally she receives help from her husband, and their five-year-old son Lane.

"It is only 3pm and I have already picked twice today," Renee said.

"Lane will usually cut the seeds to keep producing and he is pretty good at it."

CONTINUED ON PAGE 8



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Renmark Asparagus is going on 27 years out at Renmark North.



While it may seem like a comfortable situation Renee is operating at Renmark Asparagus, running a one-person show can often take its toll.

"It's back breaking, it's really back breaking sometimes," Renee said.

"I think because you have to pick it so many times a day and it's so many rows, it's hard on your back.

"It's usually just me doing the picking, my husband will help every now and then, but it's mainly me.

"I pretty much run the whole show by myself. I have thought about getting help once we get to December.

"I don't have to get help, I just thought 'why not?'. Then I get I get a break."

With all local buyers, Renee is glad she can provide quality asparagus to the Riverland community.

"We do orders during the week, and then Friday to Sunday we have a stall at the end of the driveway, which has been popular," Renee said.

"If I go visit family in Ballarat I will take some with me and there's a few people that buy it there, but it is mainly here."

With the property having been an asparagus farm for 27 years, Renee said there has been talk of switching it up before and exploring other varieties of fruit and vegetables.

"Because it's only a small farm, I am not really sure what we can do," Renee said.

"Asparagus is really good if you have only got a little bit of land."

Moving forward, Renmark Asparagus is looking to expand, with the constant demand for its asparagus a contributing factor.

"There is that demand to be able to expand," Renee said.

"We want to grow white asparagus and there's a bit to it. You have to keep it under the ground, because asparagus gets its colour from the sun.

"We will need to cover it and pick it with a special tool under the ground, so we will probably plant an acre and see how it goes."



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Who is Vinehealth Australia?

Vinehealth Australia is the South Australian statutory body that works in conjunction with vineyard owners to protect the state's vines from pest, disease and weed threats. Our activities are funded by South Australian vineyard owners and we maintain a Register of every vineyard in the state of 0.5 hectares or more. The Register is vital for biosecurity management.

Embrace biosecurity this growing season

VINEYARD owners and contractors are busy undertaking a range of operations this growing season in preparation for vintage 2024.

Vinehealth Australia, the biosecurity expert for the South Australian grape and wine industry, is encouraging vineyard owners and contractors to take advantage of the free resources on its website (www.vinehealth.com.au). These include fact sheets, posters and guidelines on easy-to-implement farm-gate hygiene practices that will help keep vines safe.

"Protecting your vineyard from pests, diseases and weeds doesn't have to be a complex, expensive, or daunting task," said Suzanne McLoughlin, Acting CEO of Vinehealth Australia.

"Whether you're a seasoned vineyard owner or new to the industry, there are simple and effective biosecurity measures you can adopt to keep your vines healthy and prevent outbreaks which are likely to cost you more to rectify – and which could have been prevented."

Key biosecurity tips include:

1. **Engage in conversations:** Strike up conversations with all visitors to your vineyard, especially contractors. Ask them where they've been before visiting your property. By doing so, you can identify potential risks associated with their previous stops. Are they coming from an area known for specific pests or diseases, such

as an interstate region that has phylloxera? If so, don't allow entry into your vineyard.

2. **Check cleanliness of machinery and footwear:** If you have machinery coming onto your property, inspect it to ensure it's clean and free of soil and plant material, including weed seeds, before it's used down your vine rows. Weed seeds can also easily be tracked on footwear. Ensure you check your own footwear often and that of all visitors, to minimise the spread of weed seeds onto, within, and off your property.
3. **Monitor the health of your vines:** When driving or walking down your vine rows during your vineyard

operations, monitor for any vines that look unusual. Get help to identify issues.

4. **Give new vine plantings the best chance to thrive:** Use planting material that has been virus-tested. Monitor for and control insect vectors that could spread viruses on your vineyard, including scale, mealybug, bud mite and blister mite.

"The small team at Vinehealth is always ready to help South Australian vineyard owners with their biosecurity and farm-gate hygiene questions. Give us a call on 8273 0550 and we can give you some advice on the simple things you can do to keep your vines safe," Suzanne said.

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The Phylloxera and Grape Industry Board of South Australia, trading as Vinehealth Australia, is your partner in biosecurity and farm-gate hygiene. Visit our website for free resources or phone us for a chat. We're here for South Australian vineyard owners.

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Tomatoes and cucumbers, grown to perfection at Two Wells

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY ELLOUISE CRAWFORD

WITH the title of Australia's biggest glasshouse, Perfection Fresh at Two Wells has the large-scale production and yield to match.

More than 730,000 plants, including more than 10 commercial varieties of tomatoes, are grown across

glasshouses spanning 43 hectares – the equivalent to 23 MCGs under glass.

The Kumato, Solanato and Mix-A-Mato branded tomatoes, as well as the famed Qukes baby cucumbers, are grown, picked and packaged year-round at Perfection Two Wells'

Germantown Road site.

All are grown hydroponically in a carefully controlled environment where everything from temperature and humidity to light and water has been perfectly planned for optimum production.

Perfection Two Wells grower Oscar Bernell said the farm is one of the most environmentally conscious of its kind in Australia.

With all that glass, rainwater is collected from the entire roof surface to water the plants while onsite gas

microturbines are used to generate electricity.

A wood boiler fuelled by recycled pallets is used to help with heating in winter, and then any CO2 from the boiler feeds the plants and helps them grow by boosting photosynthesis.

Even plant cuttings and food waste are fed to local livestock.

"Artificial lighting is a fairly new technology we are exploring but aside from that, everything from temperature, humidity, CO2 is all highly controlled and monitored every second of the day,



Grower Oscar Bernell among the tomato vines at Perfection Two Wells. Vines are trained along strings so as fruit can be lowered to picking height.



But it's not just a matter of putting them in and letting them grow – we are out here every day...

Perfection Fresh is always trialling new varieties for its Mix-a-Mato punnets, which typically feature four to six varieties, ranging in flavour from super sweet to deep and rich.



year round," Oscar said.

"And when you get to the level of control we have CO2 becomes the limiting factor, so we are able to inflate it to push the plants to their genetic potential.

"But it's not just a matter of putting them in and letting them grow – we are out here every day checking the curvature of the leaves, the flowers, the colour of the fruit, and making those minor changes to keep the plant on the right track."

All the plants are pollinated by hand (because there are no bees in the glasshouse) with new plants split into three vines and then grown in individual cubes of Rockwool with their own individual irrigation.

"The reason we use [the Rockwool] is because it is highly-engineered to have a very good capacity for holding water, but also having a good balance of air, and it's also extremely inert so it doesn't block up any of the nutrition," Oscar said.

"This is super ideal for maximising

the efficiency of our fertilisers and we capture all the water run-off, which is typically about 30 per cent and then that run off gets recycled through UV treatment.

"Then we shandy that treated water back in with fresh water so we don't lose any of the fertiliser or any of that excess water and it all gets reused."

A team of as many as 1000 growers and packers can be on site to tend to the produce during the peak summer season.

Baby cucumbers reach maturity (of eight to 12cm long) in just a week, and are picked every day to produce about 40 tonnes worth in a week.

With the vines growing up to 30cm in a week for tomatoes and up to 70cm a week for cucumbers, (or 20 metres in a year) the plants are trained up strings and then lowered on bobbins to a comfortable picking height.

The harvested fruit is then transferred to on-site packing facilities.



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MedTEC Pharma co-founder and chief executive Richard Barrett, co-founder and chief operating officer Brad Gallard, advisory board member Anna McClure and chief commercial officer Dirk Beelen. PHOTO: supplied

Brad's Medtec journey set to culminate

WORDS HUGH SCHUITEMAKER

A RIVERLANDER is helping to ensure Australians will be able to access high quality medicinal cannabis products, and putting the region at the forefront of a booming industry.

Third-generation Riverland grower Brad Gallard's MedTec Pharma is set to next year provide its first supply of medicinal cannabis to the pharmaceutical market.

Brad said supplying the domestic Australian market would be an initial focus

"Medicinal cannabis will be a US\$25bn industry globally by 2026, and Australia alone is growing at 100 per cent over the last 12 months," he said.

"Our initial focus will be to serve the high-demand chronic and neuropathic pain markets, but we will also develop adjacent solutions for sleep, appetite and anxiety.

"Our business approach, supported by the strategic partnerships we have in place, will allow the medicinal cannabis industry to eventually reflect the same high levels of scientific rigour and development maturity that characterise the most advanced speciality fields of medicine."

Brad established MedTec Pharma in 2019 with chief executive Richard Barrett.

The company's 20ha Riverland-based cultivation and production site is nearing completion and according to Mr Gallard, will create hundreds of job opportunities when operating at full capacity.

Brad said the local environment provided ideal

conditions for cultivation of the plant.

"Our facility is located in rich fertile soils in the Riverland, which has a fantastic climate to produce a gold-class standard of product for international and domestic markets," he said.

Figures from the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) show a five-fold increase in the number of medicinal cannabis approvals since 2019.

MedTec is also currently working alongside the South Australian Health and Medical Research Institute (SAHMRI) to investigate potential other technologies and applications for medicinal cannabis.

Brad said supporting the transition of medicinal cannabis to an accepted pharmaceutical industry in Australia was a personal goal.

"Our five-year partnership with SAHMRI will focus on the delivery of evidence-based results to support the entry of medicinal cannabis products onto the Australian Register of Therapeutic Goods," he said.

"This means that health professionals will be able to prescribe medicinal cannabis products with confidence."

The Advertiser previously reported SAHMRI executive director Professor Steve Wesselingh said the partnership with MedTec would provide the "opportunity to contribute to ongoing research and development at the highest level".

MedTEC has been fully licensed by the federal government for the cultivation, manufacture, research and development of medicinal cannabis.



Our facility is located in rich fertile soils in the Riverland, which has a fantastic climate to produce a gold-class standard...

Snapshot shows agricultural workforce changes

MORE women and young people are joining Australia's growing agricultural workforce, according to a national census snapshot.

The ABARES Insights Snapshot of Australia's agricultural workforce highlights the changing state of the workforce based on data from the 2021 Census of Population and Housing.

ABARES executive director Dr Jared Greenville said subtle shifts in data covering employed people aged 15 and older whose main job was in agriculture the week prior to the census was "interesting".

"Between the 2016 Census and the 2021 Census, we've seen more people overall working in agriculture: 239,093, which is an increase of 4.7 per cent," Dr Greenville said.

The number of South Australians in the agricultural workforce has fluctuated in the mid-20,000s since the 2006 census, and 26,709 were recorded in 2021.

"We've also seen a slight rise in the proportion of women (to 33 per cent), young people (to 25 per cent) and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (to 13 per cent) in the agricultural workforce over the same period," Dr Greenville said.

"Around 1.8 per cent of workers in the agricultural sector were indigenous, and 1.6 per cent had a disability that meant they required assistance with core activities.

"In 2021, 46 per cent of people working in agriculture were employed

in sheep, beef cattle and grain farming, which is a slight contraction since 2016.

"Most people who work in agriculture live in regional areas (81 per cent) and the majority (68 per cent) were in full-time employment."

While being largely dominated by male workers, the agriculture workforce is seeing an increasing proportion of female workers, with 79,827 women working in agriculture in 2021, up 7105 from 2016.

In the snapshot, young people are defined as those aged between 15 and 34, with contributions to the sector – either paid or unpaid – central to an "innovative and sustainable future for agriculture", according to the report.

The number of young people in the workforce in 2021 was 59,590, up 1 per cent from 2016, and were seen in sheep, beef, cattle and grain farming more than any other industry.

"Australia's farm population is constantly changing," Dr Greenville said.

"I'm sure plenty of people in the agricultural sector will be heartened to see more young people getting involved in the industry.

"The gradual trends seen in the statistics are a reflection of changes in agriculture and Australia's workforce more broadly."

The full snapshot can be found on the ABARES website (www.agriculture.gov.au/abares/products/insights).



Have your say on future research priorities

TIME is almost up for grass-fed beef and sheep meat producers to have their say in a research consultation process.

The Meat & Livestock Australia (MLA) initiative – which has funded more than \$50m worth of projects – aims to empower producers to directly influence the on-farm research, development and adoption (RD&A) activities their levies are invested in.

"MLA's producer consultation process puts producers at the forefront of decision-making regarding the allocation of their levies," said Georgie Townsend, program manager for consultation.

"This process is now open and ensures national and regionally relevant RD&A priorities are identified and that MLA's investments deliver optimum value to producers.

"For anyone that has a burning research challenge in their region that needs addressing, now is the time to speak up."

The producer consultation process starts with South Australian producers communicating with the state's regional consultation committee: Southern Australia Livestock Research Council

(SALRC).

Nineteen regional committees across the country meet up to four times a year and are a vital link to ensure that MLA is hearing what is happening on the ground, helping identify potential gaps where investment in research, development and adoption could provide solutions.

From there, MLA works to identify the scope, impact and scale of research needed to address the priorities.

"Through the MLA producer consultation process, MLA can ensure that where there is current research or extension activities relevant to that region are being delivered, that we communicate back to these groups," Ms Townsend said.

"I'd encourage all producers interested to get involved by contacting their local committee. MLA is committed to fostering a collaborative and innovative industry that benefits everyone involved, and this process ensures no one misses out on having their say."

Producers have until 1 December 2023 to provide their input through the SALRC (www.salrc.com.au).



AG NEWS

Grains Research and Development Corporation have developed new resources for growers considering fertiliser options amid shortages including a new Fertiliser Storage Manual for those considering on-farm fertiliser storage. PHOTO: supplied



Grower options amid fertiliser shortages

A NEW resource has been developed to assist growers experiencing a urea shortage across the country.

Grains Research and Development Corporation (GRDC) have published 'Investing in fertiliser storage infrastructure', available to read and download online, to support growers and advisers considering on-farm storage.

GRDC Grower relations manager-north Vicki Green said the resource contains technical information regarding both solid and liquid fertiliser characteristics and explains how they can influence the stability and safety of on-farm storage.

"We're aware the recent urea shortage has led to pressure on growers to consider how they can take greater control of their fertiliser decisions," she said.

"This publication, created in response to issues raised via GRDC's NGN (National Grower Network), showcases the experiences of six growers who utilise on-farm fertiliser storage for exactly that."

GRDC is also reminding growers of the importance of fertiliser supply management and how to prevent getting caught short via update events and podcasts.

Agricultural procurement specialist Robert Dawes

spoke at a recent GRDC Farm Business Update event where he highlighted important factors when it comes to negotiating supply and managing relationships with suppliers in the current environment.

"The current urea supply situation is a combination of multiple factors that have caught growers off guard, especially in eastern Australia between Toowoomba and the Eyre Peninsula," Mr Dawes said.

"Leading up to June, weather forecasters predicted a dry winter. For growers, this meant they weren't placing orders for urea because they didn't think they'd need it, and so suppliers weren't contracting to importers.

"In addition to that, we also had a falling urea price, so it didn't look like growers had to be in a rush to purchase product, some were happy waiting to purchase, because it didn't look like there would be a supply risk – as was the case during the Covid-19 pandemic and its aftermath."

Fertilizer Australia executive manager Stephen Annells said the northern and southern regions were especially impacted compared to western regions and would be considering actions they can take to reduce risk.

"In Western Australia this year, fertiliser suppliers estimate they have met 85 to 90 per cent of the urea requirement, but it's more challenging to estimate supply and demand in other states where it varies from location to location," Mr Annells said.

GRDC Grower relations manager-north Graeme Sandral, said that in regions where growers are considering the weather outlook and summer cropping conditions, liquid nitrogen may be an option.

"When choosing between nitrogen application methods, cost should be considered as foliar N tends to be more expensive," Mr Sandral said.

"It's also important to carefully select rates to prevent leaf burn when using a boom spray. The other application method is with a streaming bar or dribble bar – in this case, application is directly on to the soil.

"For the best yield results, N applications should ideally be applied at or just before stem elongation. The best grain protein results occur with application at fully expanded flag and first anthers visible. In both cases N uptake results are improved with follow up rain."

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Stay road safe with harvest underway

MOTORISTS across the state are being reminded to be aware of the increase in heavy vehicles on the road as grain harvest continues.

Thousands of additional heavy vehicles hit the road annually as grain harvest gets in to full swing from late October.

Grain Producers SA chief executive officer Brad Perry said a significant increase in truck movements carting grain would occur in the later months of 2023.

"Motorists will start to notice extra heavy vehicles on country roads as harvest ramps up and it's important that people remain patient and exercise caution when interacting with trucks," he said.

"Harvest truck movements are likely to still be going into December, which is already busy on the road due to the festive holidays, and we want to remind everyone that safety must be paramount.

"It's important to plan your trips ahead, drive to the conditions and ensure it is completely safe

before overtaking trucks and large agricultural vehicles.

"For heavy vehicle operators, this is also a timely reminder to make sure heavy vehicles are correctly registered or permitted and are properly checked before use.

"For the grain producers and carriers, it's important to have a safe access point at paddock entry or loading for heavy vehicle accessibility and safety in all weather conditions.

"Whether it's a farm-owned heavy vehicle or grain producers using contractors to cart grain, the message from us is clear: take your time to ensure you've considered any risks and put appropriate steps in place to make your harvest operations safe."

South Australian Police remind motorists to:

- Only over take when it is clearly safe to do.
- Do not attempt to pass a heavy vehicle which is engaging in a turn (left or right) or approaching a roundabout.

- Be aware of the blind spots (if you cannot see their mirrors they cannot see you).
- When overtaking with a caravan or other long vehicle in tow be aware of the windrush and suction effects of the turbulent air created by the heavy vehicle.
- Plan your journey, allowing additional time to arrive at your destination.

Motorists will start to notice extra heavy vehicles on country roads...



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AG NEWS

Rebate for sheep and goat electronic identification

APPLICATIONS for South Australian sheep and goat producers to receive a rebate on electronic identification (eID) have opened to assist farmers to adopt state new requirements.

Under the State Government program, producers will get a 50 per cent rebate – up to a cap of \$0.95 excluding GST – on the purchase of each 2023 year of birth National Livestock Identification System (NLIS) accredited eID tag purchased between 1 January 2023, and 31 December 2023.

The new national system requires sheep and farmed goats – born on or after 1 January 2025 – to be identified with a NLIS accredited eID device before leaving their property of birth.

“Moving from the current visual device and mob-based approach to eID for sheep and farmed goats will greatly improve the accuracy and efficiency of livestock traceability,” said Clare Scriven, Minister for Primary Industries and Regional Development.

“The outbreak of foot and mouth disease (FMD) in Indonesia last year put into sharp focus the importance of traceability.

“The agreement by federal, state and territory agriculture ministers to make eID nationally mandatory for sheep and goats by 1 January 2025 is a major step in ensuring we have the best possible traceability system to protect our livestock industry.”

eID devices contain a radio frequency identifier (RFID) microchip and allow for the identification of individual animals using scanning equipment.

This technology was implemented for cattle in South Australia in 2004 and has been used for sheep and goats in Victoria since 2017.

Livestock SA president Joe Keynes



welcomed the opening of the 2023 device rebate scheme in early October.

“Many producers tagged this year's breeding stock with eID devices in preparation for the transition to mandatory sheep and goat eID,” he said.

“Government assistance is important to ensure a successful transition to the new traceability system arrangements that were collectively mandated by governments last year, particularly with the recent downturn in sheep and goat prices.

“We look forward to the details for the other elements of the stage 1 transition funding, such as 2024 and 2025 eID device discounts and essential infrastructure assistance, being announced soon.”

To be eligible for the rebate, producers must have an active property identification code (PIC) and be registered with the Department of Primary Industries and Regions.

Applications are open until Tuesday 30 April 2024.

For more information including eligibility and how to apply for the rebate visit: www.pir.sa.gov.au/eid-rebate



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Many producers tagged this year's breeding stock with eID devices in preparation for the transition to mandatory sheep and goat eID

Farmers facing an increase in pests and weeds

A MAJORITY of land managers spent an average of almost \$22,000 on pest and weed species management last year, according to a national survey.

The results of the third-annual 2022 ABARES pest animal and weed management land manager survey showed 85 per cent of respondents across the country spent on average \$21,950 in the year, a demonstration of an increase in the commitment required.

Dr Jared Greenville, executive director of ABARES, said feral animals were reported to cause “considerable impacts” on properties throughout 2022.

“The survey showed 89 per cent of land managers reported problems due to feral animals in 2022, up from 85 per cent in 2019,” he said.

“Foxes, rabbits, rats and mice were the most common species reported as causing problems.

“There have also been reports of feral animals that are new to properties or have increased in numbers, such as feral pigs and deer,

that are causing damage.

“About three-quarters of land managers continue to manage pest animals on their properties through various means.

“Ground shooting was the most common management activity, used by about 75 per cent of land managers. Pesticide and/or insecticide use and ground baiting were also popular control measures, used by around 50 per cent of land managers.”

A small increase of weed-related problems since 2019 were also reported, up from 58 per cent to 60.

“The most common weeds that were reported as being new to the property were fireweed, feathertop rhodes grass, fleabane, african lovegrass, thistles and giant rats tail grass,” Dr Greenville said.

“More than 80 per cent of land managers are actively managing weeds on their properties, with the application of herbicides remaining the most common weed management activity.”

“The survey showed 89 per cent of land managers reported problems due to feral animals...”



Subsidies for protective netting

GROWERS across South Australia are able to apply for grants of up to \$300,000 to help purchase netting to protect their growing produce.

The \$14.6m Horticulture Netting Infrastructure Grants scheme, funded by the Federal Government in 2020 and co-ordinated by the State Government, initially focused on primary producers in the Riverland and Adelaide Hills/greater Adelaide regions impacted by repeated severe hail events between 2016 and 2019.

The program has now been extended to all South Australian regions, subsidising up to 50 per cent for new or replacement protective netting.

Expanding the scheme is set to help horticulturists, orchardists and wine grape growers to better protect their livelihoods from extreme weather and pests, while also reducing evaporation and saving water.

Applications close on 30 June, 2024, or when all funds are allocated. All projects funded under the grants must be complete by 30 June 2025.

For further information on the Horticulture Netting Infrastructure Grants scheme, including how to apply, visit the website (pir.sa.gov.au/funding_and_support/funding/horticulture_netting_infrastructure_grant).

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AG NEWS



Inefficiencies holding back grains industry

RECENT record harvests have highlighted a need for more capacity in the current grains industry network, with international competition being hampered by supply chain inefficiencies according to a new report.

The GrainGrowers-commissioned Connecting the Dots: Improving Australian Grain Supply Chain Efficiency report was compiled by independent global strategy consultancy LEK.

The report uses the record 2022-23 winter crop production of 65.7 million tonnes to illustrate the impact of high supply chain costs on growers and the threat to Australia's competitiveness in the global market.

GrainGrowers chair Rhys Turton said six key areas – road funding, bridge infrastructure, road regulation, rail, supply chain data and port connectivity – were found to adversely impact freight efficiency, reduce growers' profitability, and affect international competitiveness.

"Our members identified freight and supply chains as a key concern in our Annual Policy Survey, so it comes as no surprise the report identified increased capacity and efficiency of the supply chain as critical to the long-term viability of the industry," Mr Turton said.

"To remain competitive, increased supply chain efficiency is required to reduce costs for growers. Australia needs a freight network that can export Australia's grain as quickly and efficiently as possible to capture high international prices during times of reduced global supply."

Across the six key areas, the report found a range of opportunities to improve the efficiency of the grain freight supply chain:

1. Road funding – systemic long-term underfunding has left Australia's regional road network in an extremely poor condition, with most government charges directed to consolidated funds. Insufficient funding for local councils (responsible for 87 per cent of Australia's road network) impacts road

maintenance and upgrades, restricting high-productivity freight vehicles accessing "first and last mile" roads essential for getting grain to market and significantly hampering overall freight efficiency.

2. Bridge infrastructure – across Australia, thousands of bridges require replacement, with relatively low load limits restricting modern larger freight vehicles and impacting efficient access on key grain freight routes.

3. Road regulation – costly and lengthy permit requirements constrain higher-capacity vehicles transporting grain across multiple locations (farm gate, local roads) outside the heavy vehicle networks, magnifying inefficiencies in heavy vehicle road regulations.

4. Rail network and governing regulation – a patchwork of track gauges, axle loads, rail infrastructure managers, and regulation significantly reduce rail freight efficiency, creating extensive operational complexity and increasing costs to grain growers using the network.

5. Supply chain data – stakeholders require robust, publicly accessible data to provide performance transparency, mitigate disruptions, drive day-to-day improvements, and inform policy, long-term investment, and other strategic decisions.

6. Port connectivity – a mix of rail and road access and land use planning constraints at major bulk grain ports hampers efficient access for grain exports, which amount to approximately 75 per cent of grain production.

GrainGrowers is now developing a comprehensive strategy to drive improvements and efficiency and help ensure competitiveness and profitability for Australian growers.

"Maximising the grain supply chain's potential requires co-ordinated investments of capital, time and effort into policy, funding and operational optimisation," Mr Turton said.

"We will be looking at how to prioritise issues and what we firmly believe are the critical next steps."

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DEAR VALUED CUSTOMERS – BUSINESS FRIENDS

In December this year 2023, I will complete my 55 years in the Agricultural Machinery Industry.

Looking back 55 years, was this goal in my mind? – I am not sure except that I knew then I had an absolute want and passion for agricultural machinery, the land, its soil and its owners.

Maybe I should write a book on these years and speak of the ups & downs, the friendships from it, the dramatic changes in agriculture over those years or more so the dramatic changes in how dealings in this industry have gone and are now being handled by the so called “corporate” style dealers.

Nevertheless, there comes a time that I do need to stop and “smell the roses” and silly me, I didn't listen or act on the serious warnings that I had on August 28TH 2020.

On this note, and very sadly I am announcing that I am going to “hang up my boots” as my body is very tired and in further need of “repairs and maintenance” – my wife has suggested that I will be a “new Bionic Man!”- I will wait and see.

I mentioned above that our industry has changed so

dramatically over the past two decades, and in my opinion and sadly for you the primary producer, the day of the smaller agricultural machinery dealership are all over.

Until the day I die, my handshake will be my word and I will know you by your name or nickname – I never want to know you as account number XYZ!

The next line is the saddest, the most difficult and the longest time I have ever spent making a decision and I feel so sorry about it, as there will be 55 years of hands-on practical experience and a massive wealth of knowledge no longer available 24/7.

I will be **CLOSING** the front gates for DAILY general business to HOODS AGRIMOTIVE on **FRIDAY DECEMBER 22, 2023.**

The future after 2023! – As you know we are very proud with our parts support as we possibly carry more individual part numbers in stock than any other dealer – we have around 55,000 individual part numbers on our current inventory list and is confirmed with my “now famous” caption (to my staff) on 5RM Radio – “don't throw that out – you may need it one day!” – just how true this is and how

valuable it has been for you, the primary producer.

Yes, there will be sales and specials galore, and it will take me a long time to wind right down – approx. 12 months, however I do want to spend a great time with my kids and their families from across Australia over the Christmas period and I want to fully re-coop from my recent replacement.

I would also like to sincerely thank, and especially my current staff but also past staff for their efforts and contribution to the Company over the 42 years that it has traded and for getting a specialist's reputation across many states of Australia.

My phone will always be on to help and advise you where and when I can.

I have not yet decided my business plans for the “wind down” over 2024 – we will be open certain times each week – this will be advised.

I have totally enjoyed the 55 years in agriculture and I thank you all sincerely for your business and friendships.

*Norm Hood
Company Director*



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Kerry Chambers started Half Barrel Honey almost eight years ago when the bees 'chose' her. PHOTO: Elyse Armanini

When life gives you bees, make honey

WORDS ELYSE ARMANINI

IT is common knowledge that without bees we would struggle to survive as a human race, and their importance is amplified by the many produce varieties that require their pollination services across the state.

Affectionately known as the Riverland Bee Lady, Kerry Chambers knew nothing about bees except that they made honey, but that all changed almost eight years ago when the bees “chose” her.

A mother to a nine-month-old at time, when Kerry and her family returned home from an overseas holiday to a well-established nest of bees inside her veranda’s half wine barrel, something had to be done.

“I got on to YouTube and saw all these videos of people saving bees, transferring colonies in unwanted places to established hives – and I just thought, ‘Well if they can do it, I can do it,’” she said.

“I bought a Flow Hive and got a local beekeeper to come and help me. He transferred the bees from the barrel and I stood inside behind a glass door, scared out of my mind.”

Kerry built up her confidence with handling and looking after bees while still on maternity leave and became a hobby beekeeper.

“I just loved it. Any spare minute I had, I was reading about bees so I just became really obsessed with it,” she said.

When her hive swarmed – a natural way of reproducing – and split into two, which soon became four, her talents started to become known throughout the Riverland.

“I had lots of honey, so I started giving it away, and then people started to know me as the Bee Lady,” she said.

“Whenever it was swarm season it would end up being me people called to catch their backyard swarm, so my own backyard started to really fill up. I thought, ‘Right, I need to start doing markets to get rid of this honey’ and it just evolved.”

Through her business Half Barrel Honey, Kerry has grown to keep anywhere from 25 to 30 hives at a

time and now offers different services throughout the region including pollination for primary producers, swarm removal and a host-a-hive program.

Bee pollination is the driving force behind one third of the food we eat as humans, and many local crops – canola, citrus, apples, avocados, stone fruit, cherries and almonds, to name a few – rely heavily on bee pollination services.

“Here in the Riverland we have lots of almond blocks, so I started putting them on almonds, and a few on avocados and blueberries,” Kerry said.

When varroa mite came knocking in 2022, the local almond industry looked to be on the brink of failure for the season with interstate restrictions keeping bees in their own zones, and growers faced a shortage of pollinators.

“They wanted to completely eradicate the pest so, similarly to fruit fly, there were areas that had hive restrictions on them and you couldn’t move the bees,” Kerry said.

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Bees assist in the pollination of Riverland almond trees.
PHOTOS: supplied

"A lot of hives were euthanised to try and get rid of the varroa mite, and that went over a 12 to 18-month period.

"Some farmers didn't get any hives, which impacted their ability to make a profit on their almonds because you need bees for almonds to be produced. That caused a lot of issues, especially because the beekeeping industry works so closely with the almond industry and rely on each other to survive."

Bees like Kerry's are said to be most suitable for Riverland pollination due to being acclimatised to the region, with no travel stress keeping them from working on the Riverland crops immediately.

However, the national move from eradication of varroa mite to management of the pest in September 2023 is an added challenge for beekeepers like Kerry and those in the commercial space alike.

"In hindsight, we were the only continent without it and nowhere else has been able to eradicate it – so we were up against it, and should've learned from other countries to just go with management from the start and we wouldn't have had to kill that many hives," she said.

"It will be a big learning curve for us, learning what we need to look for and what we should do if the infestation goes past that point. At the moment we're also monitoring for wax moth and a hive beetle, and then we have notifiable diseases like American and European Foul Brood that we have to check for all the time and inform PIRSA if we have it.

"It's extra time, but it's also extra money having to buy equipment for that monitoring process. It's something we have to live with now – I'm just not 100 per cent sure what that will look like."

An "interesting mix" of Riverlanders have taken up Kerry's host-a-hive program, which offers a hive of bees on lease for a month at a time to improve pollination and produce honey.

"Some of those people are pretty hands-off – they have a great garden, some fruit trees, a veggie patch... but they just want the bees for pollination and don't want anything to do with them," Kerry said.

"Some other people have been interested in

getting into beekeeping but are still a little nervous about whether they can manage it, so it's a really good way to try their hand at it.

"The risk and pressures are off, you have a hive and a suit to come and watch what I do so it's education as they go."

Constantly trying to learn more as she progresses through her beekeeping career – while still a part time teacher – Kerry said the job she never tires of is swarm removal.

"I get a real kick out of catching swarms because to be good at it you need to have a really good understanding about bee behaviour," she said.

"When bees are in swarming mode they're essentially homeless, so they're less defensive.

"Before they leave the hive they fill up their honey stomachs with nectar, so it's kind of like us after Christmas lunch and all we want to do is sit down and relax.

"It is intimidating if you haven't spent any time around bees and you walk past a tree with the size of about two basketballs of bees – but they're actually really docile.

"In the middle of that ball of bees is the queen, and those bees are attracted to her pheromones so they won't leave her because if they do their chances of survival are nil."

Most recently, Kerry learned to make her own queen bees for sale to both backyard and commercial beekeepers.

"When a colony loses their queen, they need to work quick to make a new one because even though worker bees are all female they haven't mated with a drone," she explained.

"If there's no queen, there's no one making new bees so the colony will, over time, die. They'll make 10 to 15 queens and then the first one to hatch will go around and kill all the others because there can only ever be one.

"You trick the colony and just before the cells hatch you take them out and separate them to hatch on their own. I've had a few tragic times where I haven't gone back in time and one of them has hatched, all the others have been stung and that's 100s of dollars down the drain because I was a day – or even an hour – late."



The original swarm of bees that nested in a half wine barrel at the Chambers' house while they were overseas.



Kerry uses a plastic cage, similar to a hair clip, to capture queen bees and several workers during a swarm removal.



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117 years of life on (Lameroo) land

WORDS PAUL MITCHELL

CONTINUED ON PAGE 28



Lameroo's Needs family on their Lameroo property, from left: Emma, Craig, Heather and Allan Needs. The property has been in the family since 1906. PHOTO: supplied

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Lameroo's Needs family on their Lameroo property, from left: Emma, Craig, Heather (holding grandchild Riya) and Allan, with (front) Lana and Marnie. PHOTOS: supplied



THE harvest period gives the Needs family little time to reflect on an incredible 117-year history with their Lameroo dryland farming property.

Busy this year producing wheat, barley, lentils and beans, with some hay thrown in for good measure, the four-pronged unit – comprising Allan and Heather, along with their son Craig and daughter-in-law Emma – is continuing a tradition that started early last century.

"The family first got land here back in 1906," Allan explained.

"That was my great-grandfather and it was a long time ago.

"So, my son Craig is a fifth-generation farmer."

The longevity of the Needs' men suggests the land will continue to remain in the family for many years to come.

"Well, my dad's dad went to 97," Allan said.

"My father's 94 and he's still going strong. And I'm only 63."

At harvest time, the quartet all take on vital roles within the farming operation.

"My wife is on the chaser bin again this year," Allan said.

"We hired one last year and we realised what we've been missing. So we bought a chaser bin this harvest and Heather is driving the tractor with the chaser bin, chasing me on the header."

Allan said Craig is driving the semi, while Emma is doing some time on the chaser too, in between looking after children Marnie, Lana and Riya, and her usual bookkeeping and IT responsibilities.

"Emma's youngest is a bit under two years, but she does an incredible job for us," Allan said.

"Everybody's keen on the land here."

The Needs farm is situated right on the edge of Lameroo, stretching south. The mixed farming haul has evolved over the years to the current diverse mix.

"This year we're growing majority wheat, a bit more than barley," Allan explained.

"We've more than doubled up on our lentils this year. We've got a fair old parcel of lentils in, and a fair amount of beans too.

"We've basically gone for wheat, barley, lentils and beans this year, and some hay for the rotation. We didn't grow any lupins this time around.

"We went right out of sheep last year. We sold all our breeding ewes after a lot of years and took the plunge.

"We just worked out for us that the figures were better for cereal on our land... and the way it's turned out, it's been good for us this year.

"It took a lot of discussion over two years, so as far as our own breeding ewes are concerned, we initially dropped numbers, then we dropped the lot.

"We bought in a heap of ewes just prior to harvest last year and ran them over the barley stubbles which had some heads on the ground due to storm and grub damage.

"So we needed the sheep to clean up the grain to help with mice and what not."

The Needs family operation can be hectic, but Allan has the typical farmer's quality of displaying zero propensity for hyperbole.

"We're not huge farmers," he said.

"We just try to do the best we can with what we've got."



We've more than doubled up on our lentils this year. We've got a fair old parcel of lentils in, and a fair amount of beans too.

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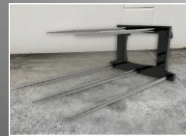


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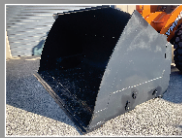
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INDUSTRY EXPERT UPDATE

Journalists Hugh Schuitemaker and Alexandra Bull spoke with key agricultural industry figures to gain an insight into their respective seasons.



Jason Size

Summerfruit Australia board member

What stage of development are we at for stone fruit varieties in the Riverland?

As at 19/10/2023 some growers are already picking early nectarines and peaches. Apricots are still a couple of weeks away. As stone fruit is spread over quite a few months, growers will also still be thinning some late varieties in preparation for later harvest.

Is there confidence around the volume and quality of fruit at this stage?

Most reports indicate apricots have a lighter set than normal and nectarines are slightly down also. Confidence is high that higher prices will result in the lower supply coming onto the market. Early price indications with early nectarines are good.

Is there expected to be any increases on overall yields compared to the previous season?

Overall yields in the Riverland have generally decreased over the last few years. Higher pricing this season may encourage new plantings with increased confidence in the market for this type of crop. Being a labour-intensive crop, it has been heavily impacted by labour supply over the

last three years and fruit fly has had an impact on accessing more lucrative markets.

How will the expected drier and hotter conditions this summer impact the development of stone fruit?

Drier conditions are ideal for stone fruit as there is less disease pressure to contend with. Increased sunshine and temperatures should also lead to sweeter fruit. The fruit should be really tasty this season. Ideal to have as part of a salad during a BBQ.

Have input costs – for fertiliser and sprays – continued to be a challenge for growers?

Higher input costs have always been a challenge. Growers know that if they reduce their input costs too much it will affect quality and quantity of their crop. Growers are always looking hard at their nutritional program to see if there are efficiencies that can be made.

What are the keys for healthy trees heading into the summer?

Providing good-quality fertiliser during spring and keeping the water up during the season. If you want a good crop for next year, summer prune during the season to ensure they let the light in and develop next year's buds.



Tim Jackson

Almond Board of Australia chief executive officer

What stage will almond trees be at in the Riverland in summer?

Summer is the final stage of the production cycle for almonds, with harvest starting in February and going through to April.

Are growers confident in the quality and volume of the nuts?

Following what many growers are describing as an ideal pollination season in August, the industry is track to bounce back from a poor season with a crop that should be in line with a long-range tonnage timeline. In 2023 we produced 103,381 after estimating pre-harvest a crop of 156,200 tonnes.

Our long-range tonnage time has us expected somewhere in the vicinity of 170,000 tonnes for the 2024 harvest.

What kind of overall tonnages are expected from the Riverland region?

The Riverland is expected to produce about 35,000 tonnes.

Aside from varroa mite, are there any other challenges almond growers are facing?

Uncertainty around water buybacks and the proposed Bill before Federal Parliament is a major concern. We have been strongly opposing more buybacks, especially in the Riverland as it will have

a massive impact on the socio-economic impact of its communities. On a broader scale it will inevitably increase the price of short-term water and potentially render a number of irrigated crops unviable in the longer term.

Low global pricing continues to create economic pressures for growers along with escalated fuel and energy prices.

How is El Nino going to impact almond trees heading into summer?

El Nino conditions in the first year will make for ideal growing conditions for almonds as it will limit the potential for disease and insect pressures.

We note that the Bureau of Meteorology is now predicting El Nino will be short lived and we could be back in a La Nina phase by later next year.

This should ease water pricing, but wet weather creates a range of challenges in the orchard for growers.

What are the keys for tree health leading into summer?

We have had optimal growing conditions since pollination, but there are ongoing disease repercussions carried over from our wet year that are still being felt in the orchards. Work is being done to address root disease like phytophthora an as yet diagnosed spate of tree deaths, mainly among our late-maturing variety Monterey.



Adrian Hoffmann

Wine Grape Council of SA Region Two chair

How are the vines looking ahead of the next vintage?

The vines are looking good for the next vintage, they didn't have the ideal shutdown, especially in the Barossa, but the vines are looking quite good.

The growth and the crop loading are quite balanced at this stage, especially going into what is potentially a slightly warmer and drier summer.

What kind of tonnages are being expected this season?

It's probably a little bit too early to tell. Flowering hasn't occurred yet so it all depends on how weather conditions for flowering go, which will happen mid to late November, but everything is looking pretty good at this stage.

Will the expected drier conditions this summer be conducive to quality wines?

I think with the weather, the last couple of seasons has been a little bit cooler and the wines haven't had quite the same concentration as what they have in previous vintages beforehand.

I am looking forward to not too hot but slightly warmer conditions, plenty of moisture in the soil along with water available through the irrigation sources, and hopefully this is conducive to pretty good quality fruit for the coming season.

Are there any restrictions on red grapes being accepted in the Barossa this season?

Basically shiraz and cabernet are two of the hardest varieties to get rid of at the moment, there is small demand for whites. Other varieties that remain fairly well in balance but shiraz and cabernet are going to be fairly hard to get moved.

So if you haven't sold them now I think you will be struggling to move them, you can probably give them away or at below cost pricing, but that doesn't really help the industry at all.

Keys for healthy vines heading into summer?

Make sure you are doing everything to achieve the best quality possible. There is no point chasing tonnes because tonnes aren't required at the industry at the moment.

What the industry needs is good quality fruit coming from growers and wineries will hopefully reward those growers who are growing that quality fruit.

I think it's up to everyone to do their bit and there's a lot of pain in the industry at the moment, so we all need to work together to make sure we can get it back to a profitable industry as quick as we can.



Mark Doecke

Citrus SA chair

What varieties of citrus are currently being harvested in the region?

Currently our season is drawing to a close with most late navels picked and Valencia harvest well under way.

Is there confidence around the volume and quality of fruit at this stage?

The quality as always is good but the supply is light with a lot of Valencia trees removed, mainly due to poor returns..

How will the expected drier and hotter conditions this summer impact the development of citrus?

We need warm weather to set a crop and grow that crop. This year 2023 has been much better than the very cold spring we had last year, so hopefully the Riverland summer will keep our citrus growing.

Have input costs – for fertiliser and sprays etc – continued to be a challenge

for growers?

All our input costs, from electricity to chemicals to fertiliser, have continued to rise. This is due partly to logistics and supply, and partly the lower Australian dollar.

There is a limit to how much you can save without compromising fruit quality and volume.

Are we seeing increased demand for Riverland citrus from Asian countries such as Vietnam and Japan?

All Asian markets are growing and demand for our quality fruit is very good. We have a commodity returning well to growers for quality fruit.

What are the keys for healthy trees heading into the summer?

As always water is the first and most important input. Fertiliser/ sprays etc are also important. Monitor water usage and maybe try some sap testing to ensure optimum growing conditions





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The (many) fruits of their labour

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY BEN LENNON

CONTINUED ON PAGE 34

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Matthew says he spends around three hours per day tending to his hobby farm.

SOME Riverlanders grow almonds, others grow grapes and the region is full of citrus orchards, but Matthew Hale and Steven Blascheck grow anything and everything.

Situated a few kilometres to the south of the Renmark township is the 1.5 hectares of organised chaos that Matthew and Steven call home.

Their property, which doubles as Matthew's teaching studio and triples as a bed and breakfast, is home a few hundred trees and vine crops, from peaches to nuts, to jujubes and avocados.

As Steven aptly put – “you name it, it's out there”.

The couple purchased the land about 11 years ago, when all that could be salvaged was a couple of fruit trees and mass amounts of space.

Since then, the pair (which is potentially the one fruit not grown on the premises) has turned the property into a vibrant patch of land that Matthew spends much of his day tending to.

“I'm probably doing stuff for three hours a day in the sense of maintaining the property, not just the fruit trees but the garden and whatnot,” he said.

“I call it a hobby farm because it isn't our absolute biggest concern. I must admit we've got our fingers in a couple of pies.”

In a past life, Matthew was the biggest private silversmith and jewellery teacher in the country, running his business out of Mount Barker and servicing around 80 students and customers per fortnight.

Those days are now gone, but it remains one of his key passions, with the former “city boy” now running a small teaching operation out of his workshop in Renmark South.

Every couple of weeks, half a dozen students keen to hone their silversmithing craft will attend the workshops, and stay a few days at Matthew and Steven's bed and breakfast.

The B&B, the couple says, is what helped kickstart the fresh fruit farm they own today.

“The whole idea was to bring people up here, have the bed and breakfast and have fresh fruit ready for people,” Steven said.

“That's where it all started.”

“We have half a dozen people that come up fairly regularly, stay, do some silver classes and eat fresh fruit,” Matthew said.

“Students come and we have three days of intense classes, and they come in and straight away they ask 'okay, what's available? What's growing? What can we have with our muesli?'”

“At the moment we have a law that the people that stay with us have to eat an avocado per day, preferably two. After all this fruit fly stuff, one wonders why we planted so many of them.”

Like many Riverland growers, Steven and Matthew were far from immune to the effects of the fruit fly epidemic.

Steven can instantly recall the exact date larvae was found on their property.

“March 15,” he said.

“I know that because of the Ides of March. This was our Ides of March.”

Matthew said “they were found on so many other properties as well”.

“If people don't turn around and say hey, this is happening, we'll end up back in the same position.

“It needs to be knocked on the head.”

Both believe there has been a shift in the way the Department of Primary Industries and Regions South Australia (PIRSA) is tackling the issue and remain optimistic about the future.

“This year PIRSA has actually been a lot more helpful,” the pair agreed.

“There seems to have been a regime change.

“Matt can't pick all the fruit up that drops but the law says you have to pick everything up, and that it's the grower's responsibility.

“They're now prepared to help pick it up for you.”

Matthew said the assistance was beneficial as he suffers from arthritis.

“It did take a little while for that to happen,” he said.

“Everyone knows now and hopefully we're in a position heading into this summer where the fruit fly is going to be totally contained.”

Fruit fly issues aside, Matthew and Steven remain as passionate as ever about their fruit production.

The pair has managed to adapt to restrictions placed on them, producing a number of different products to sell at various markets.

Their ingenuity, Matthew says, is born out of an ideology that was part of his consciousness from a young age.

“I enjoy trying to make the most of everything,” he said.

“It all started from that idea when we grew up that you just shouldn't waste anything.

“We're not big enough to get the fruit fumigated, but we're too big that we need to get rid of it.

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It's great to be able to take things to town and pass on some homemade products to friends.



Matthew Hale (left) and Steven Blascheck's hobby farm journey started around 11 years ago, when they purchased a plot of land just outside of Renmark.

"It's a catch 22 because in that sense, you need to be inventive.

"We make jams, marmalades, preserves, dehydrated fruits, glace fruit, tomato sauce and passata, plus we grow capers, asparagus, berries and vegetables.

"I think a lot of people try it (dehydrated fruit) but think 'oh I can't drink that much gin', but you can actually use those dehydrated products instead of tea, or in a glass of cold water with ice.

"You get so much out of hobbies and out of fresh produce.

"It makes people think about other things they can do. You've got jams and chutneys and sauces and roasted nuts and flavoured nuts and all those things that, instead of going down the street and buying it, you're making it yourself.

"Plus, you're not spending so much time in front of the telly."

"There's nothing on the telly anyway," Steven added.

The pair is kept company by their loyal dog Zac, who is more than excited to say hello to any and all visitors.

As much as the farm is used to make

a small income, the pair's passion for fresh produce is impossible to miss.

Smiling from ear to ear, Matthew and Steven are more than happy to share what drives them to maintain such a diverse crop.

"In summer in the evening, instead of sitting down and watching TV, you're out on the back verandah cutting fruit, putting it on trays and putting it into a sulphur tent and burning it overnight," Matthew said.

"Then you get up the next morning and put it all out to dry. It's actually quite good for you physically and

mentally, and there's nothing more rewarding.

"There's not enough of any one product to make an income so to speak, so it's not some huge money-making venture.

"It's great to be able to take things to town and pass on some homemade products to friends and family for birthdays and Christmas and stuff like that.

"There's a lot of things that we do. It's just good fun."

"It helps having your best friend with you all the time," Steven quipped.

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John and Bronny Gladigau with good friends and business partners Rebecca and Robin Schaefer. The Gladigauss have stepped away from the collaborative farming venture, known as Bulla Burra. PHOTOS: supplied

15 years of collaborative farming, friendship and a legacy to be proud of

WORDS STEPHANIE THOMPSON

ASK grain producer John Gladigau how he feels about stepping away from a collaborative farming venture known as Bulla Burra and you will be met with resounding pride for the 15-year venture.

In 2009, Mr Gladigau, together with his farming friend Robin Schaefer, pooled resources and increased their cropping area through share farming and leasing.

John recently announced on social media that he would be stepping away from his Bulla Burra role, with the Gladigau land to be farmed by Robin and his team.

John said he was proud of the Bulla

Burra story and its legacy.

"It's been a fantastic journey," he said.

"We are probably surprised at the fascination everyone else has had in it, but we opened ourselves up to that a bit through our social media presence and the like."

Prior to Bulla Burra, John and Robin were cropping about 2000ha each at Alawoona and Loxton respectively.

Through the efficiencies and structure of the collaborative farming model, with the addition of leasing and share farming, Bulla Burra is now a 9000ha cropping operation with a Facebook following of 35,000.

John said flexibility was one of the main driving forces to initially establish Bulla Burra.

"We said from the start we weren't going to work weekends except for seeding and harvest," he said.

"And even during seeding and harvest, we wouldn't work Sundays and we've stuck to that.

"When we started Bulla Burra, our kids were really young.

"Bulla Burra allowed us to get our lives back during a crucial time in our family's lives."

Not only did it allow the duo to pursue interests off farm, it allowed both John and Robin to utilise their strengths.

"Robin is the agronomist, the physical farmer and farm-manager type person," John said.

"He loves that sort of stuff, where as I like the business side.

"It really worked."

With "more drought than good years", John said the collaborative approach was beneficial in numerous ways.

"We've had tough times on the way through, but the great thing – as Robin always said – is a problem shared is a problem halved," he said.

"We could lean on each other.

"One of the great things about what

we had was that Robin and I could talk, along with operations manager Andrew Biele and others in the mix.

"We could draw stuff out from each other and there was somewhere to go to talk without burdening anybody else."

John said he is now transitioning out of his Bulla Burra role.

"Robin knows I am available to do seeding and harvest, not full time because of my other responsibilities, but as a fill in," he said.

"That could become two or three days a week and that's good, so I can still get out there

and keep the dust under my fingernails."

John recently stepped into the chairperson position at Grain Producers SA, along with commitments with the ifarmwell team at UniSA.

"To have the opportunity to step away from my on farm responsibilities to work in areas I am so passionate about which can hopefully impact the ag community in a positive way is a dream," he said.

"And to be able to do this knowing my farm continues to be run by some of the best in the business allows me the best of both worlds."



Robin Schaefer and John Gladigau at the start of their Bulla Burra venture, pictured in the Loxton News in 2009.

“

We could draw stuff out from each other and there was somewhere to go to talk without burdening anybody else.



After the Gladigauss and Schaefer started with about 2000ha each, Bulla Burra has grown to a 9000ha cropping operation.



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The Barossa Valley's dried fruit empire

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY LIAM PHILLIPS

THE Steicke family are rapidly approaching 60 years in possession of Angaston's Gully Gardens fruit farm, and they have never produced more of their famous dried apricots, pears and peaches.

It was 1964 when the Steickes purchased the 32-acre property, and while the operation has changed over time, fruit has always been at the foundation of the business.

"Back when my parents first bought the property we also had a little bit of

grazing, which we still have for beef cattle," Gully Gardens owner Rick Steicke said.

"But back then it was used for dairy. We only had about three or four cows, but that was actually the main income source, because I used to milk them and separate the cream, and then we sold that cream to Farmers Union.

"Another 60 years prior to us taking over it was run as a very much mixed farm like the German settlements – this is really one of the only farms left

in the Valley where it's set up under the German settlement, because they didn't really rely on one crop.

"So, we've got apricots, peaches, pears and prunes... back in the day prunes were a huge operation. We used to grow some two-and-a-half acres, up to about five ton of prunes... but it was relying on a lot of labour.

"During the war years, World War II, I think a lot of the industry started to decline in that area and eventually all the prune industry moved to Griffiths in

New South Wales."

Gully Gardens survived the dissolving South Australian prune market thanks in large part to their school bus business, where from 1977 through to 2012 they operated local school runs.

So, when LinkSA outbid them for that school run contract in 2012, Steicke had to figure out another way forward.

"That had been our main income source, so it was a very nerve-racking time," he said.



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Gully Gardens' dried apricots laying out in the sun after their stint in the sulphur house.



The Gully Gardens farm shop with the family dog Bella.



Rick Steicke at the entrance to the Gully Gardens farm shop.



Gully Gardens' Crunch Bars, Autumn Drops and End of Lines during the production process.

"We were lucky enough that we had the foresight to open our on-farm shop in 2006, so by 2012 we were able to lean into that.

"Prior to that we were selling all our fruit to a packer, like Angas Park, but this is the big industry concern about what's actually gone wrong and why we don't see the same kind of dried fruit industry anymore.

"Back in the 1980s and the early 1990s it was a huge industry, supplying some 3000 tons of apricots to the

Australian market, but that now has predominantly been all taken over by the Turkish apricot coming into Australia.

"That is largely due to our labour cost in production getting so out of whack. Up until this last season, Angas Park was still paying the same money – at \$7 or \$8/kg – as what we were getting back in the 1970s and 1980s. But yet the wage has gone from \$3/hour up to \$33.50/hour.

"So, from 1990 to 2000 the wine

industry just took off, and people realised that the wine industry didn't need a lot of labour, and you could do a lot more mechanically with machines, and then the fruit industry just gradually disappeared."

Needing to change their approach, Gully Gardens decided to start using their own fruit to create their own products, launching an online store to complement their farm shop while also increasing their fresh fruit sales.

"We actually probably planted more

trees, fruit trees, so we had more product," Steicke said. "So in having that extra fruit from 2012 to now, our net customer base has grown considerably.

"We didn't even have online marketing until Covid-19 hit, and now, under financial circumstances, our online has sort of taken over a lot of areas where we used to originally just rely on shop door sales.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 40



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Gully Gardens' Debbie Zimmerman sorting through the dried apricots.



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"We're also not just trying to sell a dry piece of fruit – we're making all these different products, from ginger gumnuts, to liquorice, raspberry blossoms, fruit logs – where we can actually utilize every piece of fruit no matter how damaging the seasons can be.

"Last year I introduced dried orange and dried lemon because of the gin market – people who like their gin like a piece of lemon or orange as an accompaniment.

"Barossa Fresh are a big contributor, some of the local wineries and restaurants now purchase our products, so that has all grown considerably. Word of mouth around here is what definitely sells, and I'm confident in the quality of what we're producing."

That quality comes from a system that slowly evolved through decades of experience during the Steicke reign.

"Because it's an industry that isn't really around anymore, there's no rules of thumb," Steicke said.

"But there is a template of how we do things, and that's all from my own knowledge, now going into my 42nd year of harvest.

"That knowledge is obviously very valuable, it's something you can't just grow into overnight, it takes years of experience and being brought into it.

"There are better facilities now than when I was taught, but basically the method is: you have your shed, and your sulphuring houses, and that is where the fruit is basically gassed.

"You seal all the fruit in these sulphuring houses, where sulphur is burned and absorbed into the fruit over a set period of time, and then once that fruit is cured, it's about how are you going to treat the fruit.

"So, for some, with the apricots, we'll put them out in the sun, while with peaches we use dehydration, and that's the same with pears.

"There's different techniques that we're using now where in the past I wouldn't have done that, because dehydration costs money, it's costing us power, it's costing us gas... but over time I've learned it is actually more efficient, which is what is important."

After a lifetime in the business, the Steickes admit they are ready for the next stage in their life, and are looking for someone with ambition to come along and revitalise an industry that they now feel has so little competition it has become an opportunity.

"Despite all of what's going on in the wine industry at the present time... fruit is still quite a strong industry to be in now," Steicke said.

"In fact, to anybody that's got energy and wants to move into this industry, it would be a great opportunity at this present time.

"I've always planned on settling down at 55 – and I'm 55 now – but I'm still willing to be there to support whoever eventually takes over to pass on those tricks of the trade.

"We've had this property on the market since February... I had to have a full hip replacement last year, so I've been warned that I just can't keep pushing my body to that extent. I started off when I was in Year 7, and I've been doing it for 42 years now.

"We've got around 10 acres of vineyard, so that provides the opportunity to incorporate wine and fruit with our little shopfront here if someone wanted to go that way – there's endless opportunities really."



Gully Gardens owner Rick Steicke shows off his 'End of Lines' in the on-farm shop.

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WITH Australia having one of the world's highest levels of meat consumption, many in the local industry are now urging the importance of ethical production practices.

Sales of organic meat in Australia has dramatically increased by an annualised rate of 12.4 per cent because consumers are seeking products that are perceived as more sustainable, and ethically produced.

Australia consumes a yearly average of 95kg of meat per capita, however not all is produced in an ethical way.

Farmers like the Barossa's Petar Jercic, manager of Saskia Beer Farm Produce, are working hard to educate meat eaters on where their food comes from.

Petar oversees each animal to ensure it is treated with care, from feeding to sunlight exposure.

The "true free range" ethos means the birds are raised on open pastures, exposed to sunlight and fresh air.

Saskia Beer Farm was created by Petar's wife by the same name, who established the brand in 1997 when she embarked on a mission to produce quality meat by sustainable practices.

She introduced pioneering programmes in Australia, such as milk-fed lamb, suckling pigs, and an array of game, which was guided by a seasonal, free-range, and chemical-free ethos.

Her legacy now lives on through her husband, who shares her passion to keep things ethical.

"She grew up raising birds, and something that really fascinated her was the diet," Petar said.

"She experimented for 20 years to find what she considered the perfect diet... but because we use a vegetarian diet, the chickens take longer to grow than commercial producers.

"Costs have sky rocketed for us in the past few years, and doing things on a small-scale level and doing them properly is expensive.

"Not every consumer sees the value, and don't understand that our expenses can be quite significant."

Petar said many in the industry are also feeling the frustration from clever marketing being used to almost disguise their products as humane, while actually engaging in harsh practices.

"There's a place for cheaper products... obviously if you're buying for a family of kids and are struggling with the cost of living, you've got to do what you have to," he said.

"What we don't like seeing though, are the people who aren't honest about what they're doing... Don't market it as a premium product when it's not grown with the same standards."

"The shift in the industry really needs to be consumer led, and education is a big part of that," he said.

The Australian Organic Market Report 2021 by Australian Organic Ltd notes that organic meat sales increased by 18 per cent in 2020, with an increased demand for organic and biodynamic farming practices.

Farmers like Petar are hoping this number only continues to grow.

"We try to educate people when we go to farmers markets, and just chat with the person buying meat," he said.

"We're slowly chipping away at some of these misconceptions... and we're already seeing a difference."



Saskia Beer established Saskia Beer Farm Produce in 1997, embarking on a mission to craft exceptional produce through meticulous farming practices. PHOTOS: supplied



We're slowly chipping away at some of these misconceptions... and we're already seeing a difference.



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Rainfall to November 2023: 133.8mm
Rainfall to November average: 195.6mm

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Rainfall to November 2023: 149.8mm
Rainfall to November average: 219.3mm

WAIKERIE
August to November 2023: 20.6mm
Rainfall to November 2023: 113mm
Rainfall to November average: 199.3mm

LAMEROO
August to November 2023: 62.4mm
Rainfall to November 2023: 275.8mm
Rainfall to November average: 264.2mm

GAWLER
August to November 2023: 53.4mm
Rainfall to November 2023: 233.2mm
Rainfall to November average: 335mm

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Kapunda Men's Shed members David Atkinds, Jim Gorski and Phillip Poyner at the Kapunda Recovery Resource Centre.

SA farmers hand over 6 million containers

SOUTH Australian farmers are doing the right thing with their used AgVet containers, recently passing the 6 million mark for drums collected and recycled.

"It's a great effort", said drumMUSTER manager Allan McGann.

"We thank South Australian farmers, the teams of collectors and the local councils for their work. And we look forward to SA continuing to break records in the years ahead."

Mr McGann said one community group, the Kapunda Mens's Shed, had collected around 63,000 drums at the local resource recovery centre. The Men's Shed manage the facility for the Light Regional Council.

Speaking for the Kapunda Shed, Mark Quast said the team would like to thank the local farmers for the clean presentation of 99.9 per cent of drums brought into drumMUSTER.

"So far this year 8002 drums have been processed while for the whole of last year we inspected 7202," Mr

Quast said.

"We have 13 inspectors to make rostering easier as there are two people on each weekend from 10am to 2pm, ensuring at least one drumMUSTER inspector is present to accept drums.

"Larger quantities can be brought in at an arranged time outside these hours if necessary."

Mr Quast said most of the plastic containers marked with the drumMUSTER logo are collected from dryland cropping areas of cereal crops such as wheat, barley and oats. Other drums come from vineyards in the nearby Barossa Valley.

drumMUSTER, one of Australia's oldest product stewardship programs, has now collected close to 42 million used containers off farms since it commenced in 1999.

Its sister program, ChemClear, has collected 980 tonnes of unused AgVet chemicals off farms and disposed of them responsibly.



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Water breakthrough for livestock

PRODUCERS can ensure their livestock have access to healthy drinking water using a system that softens hard water sources for decades – with no maintenance.

This can help to optimise stock weight gains and provide protection from illness and disease, ensuring higher overall productivity, while scouring is commonly ceased when lactating cattle and calves drink treated water.

To improve the quality and ensure the integrity of farm water, South Australian-based agricultural water engineering specialist Hydrosmart has pioneered, across 25 years, its innovative physical water conditioning system.

Tried and proven across all agricultural markets, Hydrosmart now does pivots and flood irrigators all around Australia.

Hydrosmart CEO Paul Pearce said the electronic system was designed to help homeowners and farmers improve the quality and performance of highly-mineralised, hard, salty, iron or calcium/gypsum-affected water from bores, rivers, town mains and saline areas.

He said it was based on particle physics research, which has established that scale layers and corrosion problems are related to how well minerals in water are dissolved.

Their systems and processes have met with resounding success.

"Because our Hydrosmart system dissolves a broad range of minerals that build-up in water pipes, the water flows easier," he said.

"And, when dissolved, the minerals

are kept longer in suspension – without building-up to form new scale.

"These minerals then run out with the water through the pipes, pipeline drippers, sprayer units or other equipment that is in full-time contact with treated water.

"After water treatment, the minerals become a valuable asset because they are better able to be metabolised by plants and animals."

Mr Pearce said a range of products was available.

"Our new HydroMAX unit is capable of working powerfully on very hard water in large pipe flows used for flood irrigation and centre pivots with a range of exciting outcomes now being reported for numerous growers," Mr Pearce said.

"Dave Prosser in Marcollat was about to retire his pivot due to poor lucerne growth and pivot corrosion when instead, he fitted a 225 millimetre HydroMAX system and saw a rapid response on water of 3550 conductivity as his crop yielded more than he had seen for years.

"The salts on soil inside the drop zone disappeared, also he reported that the same treated water used around his homestead on lawns and gardens had them all take off.

"Similarly, in Tintinara, centre-pivot grower Michael McCabe, who used a screwdriver trial to assess soil hardness, saw the white salts on soils rapidly disappear (and) his crop yield 25 per cent more.

"Greater flowering and vigour was observed by his agronomist also and his screwdriver slid into soils instead of taking great pressure to push into soil

as had always been the case prior."

Mr Pearce said this change meant healthier livestock and increased crops for all types of farmers and all property sizes.

He said the technology has proven itself as sustainable, long-term and effective at tackling Australia's diverse – and often harsh – water challenges to boost agricultural business returns.

Mr Pearce said one of their Hydrosmart's customers, Williams Cattle Company, was installing units into all its homestead and many of its stock water applications, after hearing about the benefits from other users.

Hydrosmart is a family business as Paul and both his sons Zac and Jai Pearce are taking on the next generation of water care.

They have been working nationally with family farming businesses for about 25 years to help them improve on-farm water quality and systems.

"After working in water for so many years, I believed it was definitely something everyone needed: good water or bad water that does good things," Mr Pearce said.

"I started some good partnerships with scientists and we have a biologist and electrical engineer in the team.

"We found we could add real value to water by using frequencies and a little bit of electricity, without any filters or consumables, and no waste streams."

Mr Pearce said farmers used the Hydrosmart system to address a range of water issues for stock, pasture, crops, viticulture and horticulture.

A housed Hydrosmart unit. The units can be installed to remove iron scale from pipes and stock valves and improve salty bore water supply for healthy heavy cattle. PHOTO: provided



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Seed potato producer Justin DellaZoppa is aiming to improve the quality and sustainability of potatoes grown in Australia.
PHOTO: supplied



Justin's potato passion

WORDS CHRISTINE WEBSTER

TAYLORVILLE primary producer Justin DellaZoppa's interest in growing potatoes began when he was a child.

To further develop his knowledge in seed potato production, the third-generation grower has won a prestigious 2024 Nuffield scholarship of \$35,000.

The bursary, sponsored by Woolworths, will enable Justin to travel overseas over the next 12 months to learn about the latest technology being used by seed potato growers.

Although the DellaZoppa family has been growing potatoes for many decades, Justin only started growing certified seed potatoes three years ago.

He is excited about winning the scholarship, developing global connections and networking with other seed potato growers overseas.

"It will be great for my personal growth, joining such an elite farming network," Justin said.

"I want to learn to grow the best quality seed potatoes and be sustainable for the future."

Justin said it takes five years

to produce potatoes that are ready for consumers to eat.

Spuds first begin as tissue culture developed in a laboratory into mini tubers that are planted to produce seed potatoes.

Seed potato growers then plant the mini tubers to produce seed potatoes, which are then used to cultivate potatoes for the marketplace.

"You then on-sell the seed potatoes to growers, and they will multiply them and put potatoes in the shops," Justin said.

The scholarship will enable him to visit countries in Europe and North America to learn about their seed potato production techniques.







"They are older countries than Australia and their practices in growing seed potatoes are more advanced," Justin said.

"Any knowledge you can gain from them would be beneficial."

Justin says his aim is to improve the quality and sustainability of seed potatoes grown in Australia.

"I am looking to discover technology to assist in the growing and development of new seed potatoes," he said.

"I feel that technology is going to transform agriculture in the coming years."



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Justin will be studying the growing practices, technology and cool storage, and harvesting methods used by growers in countries such as Germany, Belgium, Ireland, Scotland, the United Kingdom, United States and Canada.

He believes techniques needed to be developed in the Australian potato industry to overcome labour shortages and reduce costs.

Justin said it was also important to develop methods to provide clean and disease-free seed potatoes.

"I think drones and autonomous machinery will become an efficient way of checking seed potato crops for disease," he said.

He would also like to investigate how overseas countries use infra-red equipment to detect disease early and control weeds.

He said the use of optical grading lines would also make sorting seed potatoes more efficient.

"If you don't have clean seed, you get a lot more waste at the fresh market or processing end," he said.

"There is about 30 per cent wastage, when they pack it out, so if you have clean seed, you will reduce food waste.

"We also need to boost yields and uniformity of the crop."

Justin also grows citrus, shallots, onions, wheat, barley oats and canola seed on his property and employs two workers.

He is optimistic about the future of seed potatoes and his involvement in the industry.

"The increase in demand for me to produce seed potatoes has indicated that my business will expand, and I will need more labour," Justin said.

He is hoping the technology he learns about during his overseas study trip will make the production process more efficient in the future.



Justin DellaZoppa's two-year-old daughter Olivia with seed potatoes ready for market.

2024 Nuffield scholar, Taylorville primary producer Justin DellaZoppa (centre), at the gala presentation dinner in Perth in September with Nuffield Australia chair, Robert Bradley (left) and 2020 Nuffield Woolworths Scholar Luke Cantrill.



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AG NEWS



Counselling sessions double as conditions worsen

MENTAL health support is being sought out by Australian farmers at almost twice the rate of last year, according to a rural charity.

Rural Aid revealed in the two months to October 2023, counsellors conducted 277 sessions – a 95 per cent increase compared to the same period in 2022.

Rural Aid's helpline – offering free and confidential counselling to farmers, their family members and workers – is currently fielding an average of 13 calls each day from primary producers.

Rural Aid's manager of mental health and wellbeing, Myf Pitcher, said the range of topics that farmers are worried about has also recently widened.

"This time last year, our farmers were primarily coming to us with concerns about flooding and stress," she said.

"At the moment, farmers are worried about bushfires, dry conditions, water scarcity, fodder, varroa mite and poor stock prices.

"Our farmers have moved from states of stress to states of desperation."

Sheep and cattle farmer Ron Dooley said the Rural Aid counselling service helped him get through a difficult time after the Black Summer bushfires.

"I had a bit of a mishap when I was fighting the front of the fire," he said.

"I couldn't see where I was going and I ran into a dam wall and stalled the tractor with the flames coming through the bottom of the tractor.

"It was a bit hard when you sat back after that and thought back to what could have been.

"After talking with Darren (Devlin) from Rural Aid, he (helped

me to make) some decisions on what to do when feeling like that, and it did help."

Rural Aid's east Gippsland counsellor and community representative, Mr Devlin said farmers can easily get overwhelmed by the myriad of decisions they encounter after a disaster.

"Most of the people I've spoken to never really got over one disaster before it rolled into the next," he said.

"It becomes very hard to reach out; you're doubting yourself. My suggestion is reach out sooner rather than later."

Rural Aid counsellors catch up with their farmers where they're most comfortable; whether it's on farm, in town, or over the phone.

Rural Aid's counselling intake line can be contacted on 1300 175 594.

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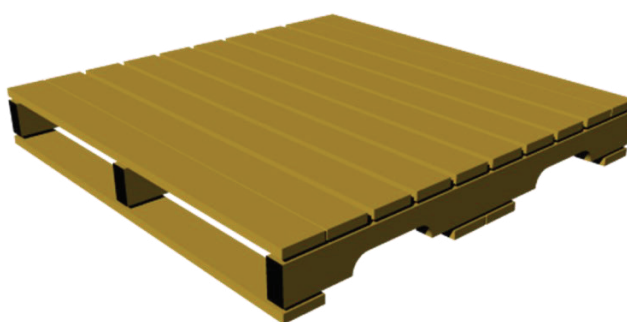
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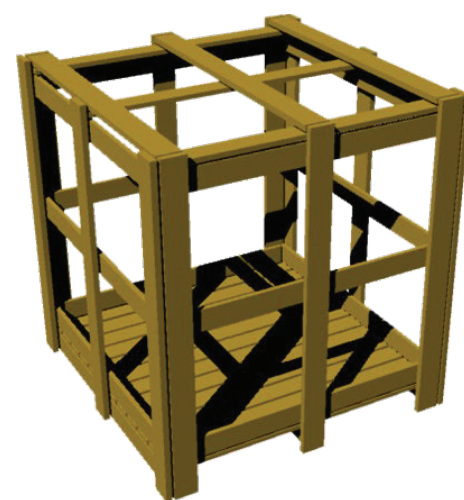
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