

FOUR BEAUTIFUL SEASONS TWELVE FANTASTIC MONTHS ONE VERY BIG YEAR



LANI HOUSTON

This is the text of an address delivered by Lani Houston, CEO, Regional Development Australia [Griffith], at the second of three *One River Symposia*, presented under the banner of *Critical Undercurrents*. This session was held in Mildura on Sat 16 March 2013 as part of the Mildura Wentworth Arts Festival.

I have lived in the Murray Darling Basin for most of life, apart from living in Sydney for University and a few journeys and extended periods overseas. I grew up on a 18,000 acre or 7,000 hectare property 23kms west of Hay in the Riverina region of NSW. Our property named Budgewah is a grazing property with merino sheep for wool and meat.

However during the late 1980's/ 1990's with the wool slump, stockpile & low sheep prices my parents decided that to sustain the family farm, rice was really the only option. My father had little cropping experience or machinery so decided to use contractors. Both my parents were conscious of the landscape and that our property was located 12km from the river and it wasn't set up for farming. However rice was the only option to generate a cash flow for the family business supporting our family and my grandparents.

Contractors grew rice for some 10 years before my brother returned home and at this time wool/sheep prices started to improve. Rice prices started to fall and costs associated with land forming & levelling that would be required to enable our rice cropping system to operate more sustainably increased & the decision was made that we would no longer grow rice but focus again on sheep and cereal crops for stock feed. The following 10 years of drought meant destocking and feeding sheep. My brother installed poly pipe to ensure stock and domestic water could be transferred from the river to the property (some 12kms) to save water that was being lost through evaporation and seepage. This initiative was implemented before any of the on farm efficiency or water saving infrastructure funding programs were available. It was a difficult time for our family, as for many others across the Basin.



My brother is the fourth generation on the farm and this year the Houston's celebrate 125 years since our great grandfather settled from Ireland. This personal story is similar to many others living and working on grazing or farming properties in the Murray Darling Basin. Farmer/graziers adapting, improving and diversifying their practices to meet climate changes, environmental demands and commodity fluctuations, to ensure a sustainable business is passed onto the next generation. However it is also worth noting each farming enterprise is structured in a different way and demands on families or individuals vary greatly, so you should not necessarily compare one with another.

One River is a Centenary of Canberra project, proudly supported by the ACT Government and the Australian Government.



I believe we are starting to see a more reflective response from farmers, especially the younger generation who come into the role with a broader education with knowledge and experience in new sustainable industries and innovative strategies so they can embrace a regenerative approach to agriculture.



Regional Development

Each region or catchment in the Murray Darling Basin operates differently although part of the one Basin. Much of the Basin has experienced drought and in the last two years flood. Most agricultural enterprises have been operating from a high debt position with minimal cash flow . Farming families have been economically and emotionally drained and this has impacted on all sectors of the community including schools, sporting groups, volunteer committees, retail, service agencies etc.

Although on an international scale Australia’s agricultural production or export market is relatively small, for many regions in the Murray Darling Basin particularly regions such as the Riverina agriculture is the main industry that drives the economy, creates employment and sustains communities. At the 2011 Census Agriculture, Fishing & Forestry was the largest industry employer in the Riverina (Source: <http://myregion.gov.au/profile/riverina>). Manufacturing is also a large employer and this is in relation to the value adding to many food and fibre products in the region such as rice, wine, chicken, horticulture, cotton, sheep/cattle. Therefore a strain on the agricultural sector impacts on the whole community, in regions such as the Riverina and others with a similar economic base. From a regional development perspective it is imperative that we build the capacity of people in these communities as well as the farmers/graziers to be able to adjust to change. Agriculture will remain a vital industry to a number of regions in the Basin into the future but obtaining the balance with the environment, competing industries (such as mining) and fluctuating commodity prices will mean that it will occur in a different way. Already there are large corporates, family farms and niche farms operating. The mix will continue to grow and change with a new generation coming into the fold.



A new way of doing business

Farmers need to be price makers as opposed to price takers. Traditionally farmers / graziers have grown their product (sheep, wheat) and left other agencies or organisations to market the product. Except for a few sectors such as Sunrice which is a great example of a locally grown and marketed product, from paddock to the packaged product that the end consumer eats. The traditional markets for commodities internationally and nationally is changing and the way to access these markets is also changing.

In Australia in the food industry the large Corporates such as Coles & Woolworths certainly play an important role but there are niche markets developing seeking local food. The demand for more local food and fibre and more importantly identification of these products in supermarkets and restaurants is expanding. Cooking programs emphasise the nutritional value of fresh local produce and are starting to encourage viewers to connect with the people who produce it. The paddock to plate concept has re-emerged with the addition of the low & slow food mile concepts.

Cost pressures for farming enterprises are increasing considerably such as fuel, transport, water, water system infrastructure, pest control, soil improvement and electricity but the price given at the farm gate is not reflecting this. The current Australia dollar is also impacting on those agribusiness sectors who are exporting. So these combined with changes in weather patterns and environmental systems make farming a business with many variable inputs.

A new generation of farmers are certainly aware of the cost price squeeze in food and fibre markets and are looking for innovative ways to overcome this as well as balance the demands of the environment.



Regenerative Agriculture

One solution is looking at how you can reduce some of the costs , recycle waste products and simultaneously improve the capability of the soil. Large corporates in the cotton industry are engaging Craig Hartin, C & H Organic to compost cotton trash to create a nutrient rich top dressing that can be added back onto pasture or prepare the soil for next years crop. The process involves adding water to the cotton trash and turning the trash to allow air in so natural microbial activity can occur. This is just one example, there are numerous other examples of regenerative agriculture that are starting to emerge with a more environmentally conscious ethos evolving around agriculture.

A new generation and new markets

Vito Mancini (right of picture and his cousin Anthony Mancini left) is a Director of Redbelly Citrus. A passionate citrus producer that has looked at different varieties, markets and value added products to ensure the sustainability of the

family business. Products include Redbelly blood orange syrups, marmalade's and juices. The family market Redbelly Citrus wholesale direct to restaurants, fine food stores and other traders as well as direct to consumers.

Vito Mancini Redbelly Citrus is a Australian 3rd Generation farming family with our eye's focused not only on Australia's farming future but our families farming future. His grandparents originated in Sicily, Italy which is also home of the blood orange.

Vito states "It is vitally important that we maximise the benefits of the use of land and water to build a sustainable and efficient farming enterprise to give our families the best opportunities for the future. The cost of water for irrigators is not only financial but also successive, for all irrigators know that water supply, quality and availability needs to be preserved for future farming generations".

New systems to reduce input costs:

- Implementation of a closed farming system with no irrigation water leaving the properties, the system is closely monitored by multiple soil irrigation monitors which are web enabled to allow for constant monitoring.
- Orchards are planted to maximise benefits of irrigation by also utilising new micro irrigation techniques such as low flow drip emitters that apply less than 1 litre per hour that gives us the precision to meet our crop demands.
- Pump sites are also designed to optimise power usage by using Variable Speed Drive's to only pump the required amount of water hence using the correct amount of energy.
- Looking to implement new systems such as pH and Electrical Conductivity measurements in the coming months.

<http://redbellycitrus.com.au/who-we-are/about-redbelly>

Niche Industries

Some new niche industries have established themselves in the Riverina region such as:-

The Jojoba Company - Since its inception in 2008, the company has grown from a start-up venture to a mainstream player within the skin care sector, utilising the benefits of 100% natural Australian jojoba as the hero ingredient.

Jojoba plants love the sunny Australian outback where they are not affected by pests or diseases. The company grow the jojoba in Yenda, NSW (near Griffith).

<http://www.thejojobacompany.com.au/about-us/our-story/>

Mates Gully Organics- Is a family business owned by Paul Nolte and Marcia McCoy located in Wagga Wagga. Fresh, seasonal produce grown organically on the farm is brought daily into the Mates Gully Café restaurant to produce delicious meals with exceptional flavours. As Paul says "we are literally bringing the food from the paddock to you".

<http://www.matesgully.com.au/Home.html>

Walnuts Australia - a subsidiary of Websters Australia (Australian Company listed on the ASX) that owns 540 hectares of walnut orchards in Tasmania and 1,365 hectares in the Riverina, NSW, which in total is over 600,000 trees. Walnuts are a relatively new crop to the region but the climate and soils are well suited to the Walnuts. The Riverina walnuts are hulled & dried in the region ready for export in-shell. The company has plans to further develop processing of the walnuts in the region

<http://www.websterltd.com.au/walnuts/>

Timing & Support

Now is a good to restore confidence for the farming communities so they can embrace the opportunities and look at new systems. There is water availability, low interest rates, reasonable commodity prices and the MDBP is imbedded into legislation so there is certainty (as long as the implementation phase involves all stakeholders community, environmental organisations, irrigators & industry and provides enough resources to enable farmers/communities to adapt).

To enable communities to adjust the appropriate resources need to be provided. This includes funding or funding programs that encourage further water saving infrastructure, environmental management, diversification of agricultural product and education (research and skill development for those in the industry and communities). Access to faster broadband will be pivotal for the future of farming and educating the community about the food and fibre economy. The Gen Y generation are already leading the way and this is occurring on farm as well. I pads and

iphones enable access to markets, weather, commodity prices, water control all while the farmer is out and about on the farm. Elissa Strong is one of the younger generation, an agronomist & grain trader she is working with farmers all the time and keen to introduce them to new cropping practices and systems. Elissa's generation will be our farming future.



Reflect on the past, be realistic about the present and optimistic about the future! Our younger generation involved in food & fibre production are evidence of this! Its important to connect our generations of farmers so the wisdom and experience of the past can be passed onto the next generation who have enthusiasm and an optimistic outlook about the future.

Art4Agriculture

Art4Agriculture's vision is to design and deliver community events that are a true celebration of the diversity, sustainability, creativity and progress of primary industries, their people, place and produce. Art4Agriculture is a network of young people who share a passion to tell others about the pivotal role Australian farmers play in feeding the world. Mostly they are young rural people who love working in agriculture, be it in the beef, sheep, dairy, cropping, wine or horticultural industries. Art is a mechanism to tell people's stories, to create understanding and this is important so people from all sectors in the Basin can work collaboratively to ensure a balanced approach to the environmental, social and economic sustainability of the Basin and its river system.

<http://www.art4agriculture.com.au/index.html>

