

The
WEEKLY TIMES



FARM BUSINESSES



AWARDS

Presented by

RAS

2007 Catalogue of Results



2007

The Weekly Times Farm Business Awards

Proudly presented by The Royal Agricultural Society of Victoria

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The Royal Agricultural Society of Victoria thanks The Weekly Times for providing many of the images and profiles in this document.

OFFICE BEARERS

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The
WEEKLY TIMES



Australian farmers must be the most resilient in the world. Drought, floods, cheap imports, red tape, no matter what gets thrown their way they not only manage, but prosper.

The past 12 months have presented some unique problems for farmers across southeast Australia. But, as you will see in these awards today, no challenge is too great for the innovative, persistent and brave.

The Weekly Times Farm Business Awards highlight those farmers who not only accept a challenge, but relish it, who can turn adversity into opportunity.

With world food shortages, strong demand for biofuels and a growing appetite in developing nations, Australian agriculture stands on the cusp of exciting times.

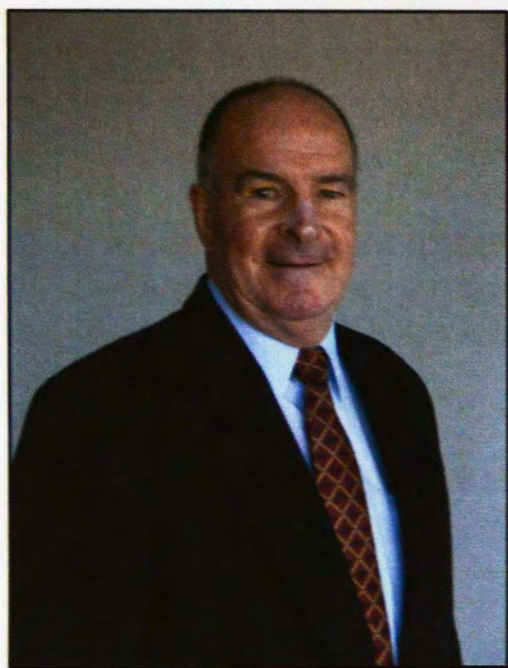
And these awards highlight the methods and philosophies that will capture the opportunities that are coming farming's way.

The finalists in The Weekly Times Farm Business Awards deserve the accolades they will be given today and I congratulate their achievements.

The Weekly Times is again delighted to join forces with the RASV to present these prestigious awards.

Ed Gannon,
Editor
The Weekly Times

MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT



It has been another very challenging year for many rural producers with the ongoing impact of dry seasonal conditions coupled with increasing cost pressures within the economy. Against this background we continually marvel at the innovative approach taken by producers to enhance their prospects with new technology, science, management systems and marketing.

We believe The Weekly Times Farm Business Awards plays a valuable role in encouraging and rewarding the endeavours of these outstanding producers (business managers) which are often unnoticed in the broader community.

Launched in 2005, The Weekly Times Farm Business Awards has brought together a number of awards conducted previously by both the RAS and The Weekly Times. The program identifies and celebrates the achievements of farming business leaders across all primary agricultural sectors.

We are very grateful for the strong support of our sponsors, Bayer CropScience, CASE IH, Genetics Australia, Rural Finance, Victorian Agricultural Shows Limited, the Department of Primary Industries and of course The Weekly Times. Their involvement in the Awards extends beyond financial input, forming a much valued network in helping us seek out the best of the best in the field of agriculture, and is indicative of their commitment to excellence in Australian agribusiness.

Congratulations to the winners of each category and the overall winner of the coveted Weekly Times Farm Business of the Year, Cutri Fruit, of Woorinen in Victoria.

A special thank you to all the entrants and their communities for supporting the competition.

Our judges have again professionally handled the daunting task of selecting the winners of each category from a very competitive field and to them I extend a big thank you.

In an ever changing world we trust the achievements of our winners will encourage and assist others who are embarking on a similar journey as knowledge and information is shared through their success in The Weekly Times Farm Business Awards.

While appreciating the contributions of all involved we look forward to progressing this competition with your ongoing support to enhance the future of Australian agribusiness.

John Fox
President
The Royal Agricultural Society of Victoria Limited

ABOUT THE WEEKLY TIMES FARM BUSINESS AWARDS

The Weekly Times Farm Business Awards are proudly presented by The Royal Agricultural Society of Victoria Limited (RAS) to recognise and reward outstanding achievement in commercial agricultural production.

Through the assistance of expert industry personnel and the generous support of sponsors, The Weekly Times Farm Business Awards honours the best farming business across Victoria and the Riverina district of New South Wales.

The Awards recognise producers who demonstrate innovative business practices, optimising sustainable productivity and profitability.

The program caters for all sectors of the agricultural industry through identifying and rewarding:

- The Bayer CropScience Horticulture Producer of the Year
- The CASE IH Crop Producer of the Year
- The Genetics Australia Dairy Producer of the Year
- The RAS Beef Producer of the Year
- The RAS Alternative Farming Producer of the Year
- The Rural Finance Sheep Producer of the Year
- The Department of Primary Industries Young Farmer of the Year
- The Weekly Times Farm Business of the Year



The RAS and The Weekly Times congratulate all award winners on their achievements and wish them ongoing success.

Cash Prizes

The award winner in each category receives \$3000 in prize money. The farming enterprise which is named the overall Weekly Times Farm Business of the Year will receive a further \$7000.

THE JUDGING PROCESS

Farm businesses were eligible to enter the Awards if they had been in operation for more than three years and located within Victoria and the Riverina district of New South Wales.

The DPI Young Farmer of the Year was open to producers 35 years of age and under.

The Production Category Judging Panels

There were six specific Production Category Judging Panels consisting of expert industry personnel who completed the first stage of judging.

Each farming enterprise was assessed using information they provided in the Business Assessment Questionnaire, which were developed with the specific commodity in mind, but a balanced range of criteria was maintained throughout.

Judges assessed performances of each entrant over the past three years and their future plans based on the following criteria:

Production Assessment	50%
Environmental Management	15%
Technology Applications	15%
People Development	10%
Future Plans	10%
TOTAL	100%

The winner of each specific Production Category (Alternative Farming, Beef, Crop, Dairy, Horticulture and Sheep) proceeded to the final stage of judging to compete for the overall Weekly Times Farm Business of the Year Award.

The Finalist Judging Panel

The Finalist Judging Panel comprised of representatives from leading agribusiness organisations. The Panel selected the overall Weekly Times Farm Business of the Year using the same criteria as the Production Category Judging Panels.

Producers who had nominated as young farmers were selected by each Production Category Judging Panel to be considered for The Department of Primary Industries Farmer of the Year Award. The recipient of this award was also determined by the Finalist Judging Panel.

THE WEEKLY TIMES FARM BUSINESS AWARDS JUDGING PANELS

The Production Category Judging Panels were selected for each award category based on their knowledge of the relevant industry. The judges for the 2007 program were as follows:

Mr Bill Bray

President, Cattle Council of Australia

Bill was elected as President of the Cattle Council of Australia in 2004. He runs a mixed beef/sheep operation and has been an active member for the Victorian Farmers Federation (VFF) for the past 21 years and is the immediate past-President of VFF Livestock Group.

Mr Neil Clark

Chairman, Farm Management 500

Neil Clark is a founding member and Chairman of Farm Management 500 and has 38 years experience in the agricultural industry. Neil is principal of his own consulting company based in Bendigo. Neil Clark & Associates specialise in providing statistics and business intelligence resources to the agribusiness sector.

Ms Jo Crosby

Sub Project Manager – Dairy, Department of Primary Industries

Jo is currently the manager of the CAS Dairy Project in south west Victoria and specialises in dairy cow nutrition, pasture management and general dairy extension.

Mr Charles De Fegeley

Producer and Farm Consultant

Charlie manages his family's property "Quamby" which is situated near Ararat in western Victoria and is also a partner in the Ballarat agricultural consultancy company, Mike Stephens and Associates where he specialises in productive livestock systems. Charlie's property 'Quamby' has been a demonstration property since 1989 where they have hosted over 5000 producers at field days and seminars.

Mr Garry Hallam

Sheep and Wool Specialist, Department of Primary Industries

Garry has 36 years experience in sheep and wool extension and research with the Department of Primary Industries. Garry has his own farming business focussed on prime lamb and wool production and provides specialist support to the Bestwool/Bestlamb and EDGE network projects.

Mr Neil Harris

Wool Producer

Neil is primarily a wool producer with 28 years farming experience. Neil has previously been Chairman of BestWool 2010 and the Seymour Wool Marketing Group.

Ms Megg Miller

Rare Breeds Victoria

Megg is a small farms writer and self employed publisher. She publishes 'Grass Roots' and 'Australasian Poultry' magazines, writes Backyard Farm for 'Burke's Backyard' magazine plus farm stock articles for 'Victorian Lifestyle' magazine. Megg is a member of the RAS Poultry Committee for the Royal Melbourne Show.

Mr Peter Owen

Producer

Peter is a dairy farmer from Driffield in central Gippsland and is the immediate past President of United Dairyfarmers of Victoria and Vice President of Australian Dairyfarmers Ltd.

Mr Banjo Patterson

Grains and Drought Project Manager, Department of Primary Industries

Banjo was involved in judging the RAS Victorian Farm Management Competition from 1980 until it evolved into the Farm Business Awards and is an Honorary Life Member of the RAS. Banjo has worked with the Department of Primary Industries since 1980, specialising in farm business management, emergency management and project management of the livestock and grains industries.

Mr Dougal Purcell

Beef Industry Development Officer, Department of Primary Industries

Dougal is currently based in Ballarat, but has conducted a number of programs across the state in his role at the DPI.

Dougal obtained his Agribusiness degree majoring in rural science at the University of New England, Armidale, NSW, and started with the DPI on completion. He was the 2005 Semex/Phoenix Genetics Michigan State University scholar.

Mr Jamie Ramage

Producer, Chairman of BestWool/BestLamb

Jamie specialises in feeder lamb production and marketing. He is currently President of the Australian Coopworth Council and is Chairman of Bestwool/Bestlamb and is a bursary winner of the Wool Market Linkages Program.

Dr Cherie Reilly

Research Coordinator, Birchip Cropping Group

Cherie completed her PhD on Genotype x Environment Interactions in Wheat Breeding in Southern Australia from The University of Melbourne in 1998 and has been working for the Birchip Cropping Group for four years.

Mr Henry Schneider

FruitCheque Officer, Department of Primary Industries

Henry has been a district horticulture advisory officer for 33 years and specialises in deciduous orchard fruit tree management. Henry received a Department of Primary Industries Executive Award for his work on Oriental Fruit Moth control in 2003.

Mr Jack Spiers

Producer

In addition to operating his own enterprise, Jack works as a private consultant. He is also a Director of Land and Water Australia and a Director of Glenelg-Hopkins Catchment Management Authority. He was awarded the prestigious McKell medal for Natural Resource Management from the Australian Federal and State Governments.

Mr Rohan Wardle

Research and Extension Agronomist, Southern Farming Systems

For the past two years Rohan has been the trials program coordinator for Southern Farming Systems with a focus on stubble retention, preceded by working as a lecturer at Marcus Oldham College in crop and pasture production and commercial agronomy at Elders Horsham. Rohan has a share farm at Lismore, Victoria.

Mr John Watson AM

Chairman of Incitec Pivot Ltd, Primesafe and the Dairy CRC and Director of Rural Press Ltd and Tassal Ltd.

Previously a dairy farmer from Northern Victoria and a past President of the United Dairyfarmers of Victoria, John now is a director of various agricultural organisations and has also received an Australian Centenary Medal and is a Member of the Order of Australia.

Mr Dick Whale

Managing Director, Independent Breeding & Marketing Service Pty Ltd

Dick has had years of experience in the beef industry working in research and designing breeding programs. Dick now manages his own breeding program company and has clients in the eastern states of Australia and the USA.

2007 AWARD WINNERS

THE WEEKLY TIMES FARM BUSINESS OF THE YEAR

Cutri Fruit
Woorinen, Victoria

THE BAYER CROPSOURCE HORTICULTURE PRODUCER OF THE YEAR

Cutri Fruit
Woorinen, Victoria

THE CASE IH CROP PRODUCER OF THE YEAR

Nalda Park Pastoral Company
Benayeo, Victoria

THE DEPARTMENT OF PRIMARY INDUSTRIES YOUNG FARMER OF THE YEAR

Gaethan Cutri
Cutri Fruit
Woorinen, Victoria

THE GENETICS AUSTRALIA DAIRY FARMER OF THE YEAR

W.T. & K.J. Bodman
Won Wron, Victoria

THE RAS BEEF PRODUCER OF THE YEAR

P.A. & M.T. Kirk
Tallangatta, Victoria

THE RAS ALTERNATIVE FARMING PRODUCER OF THE YEAR

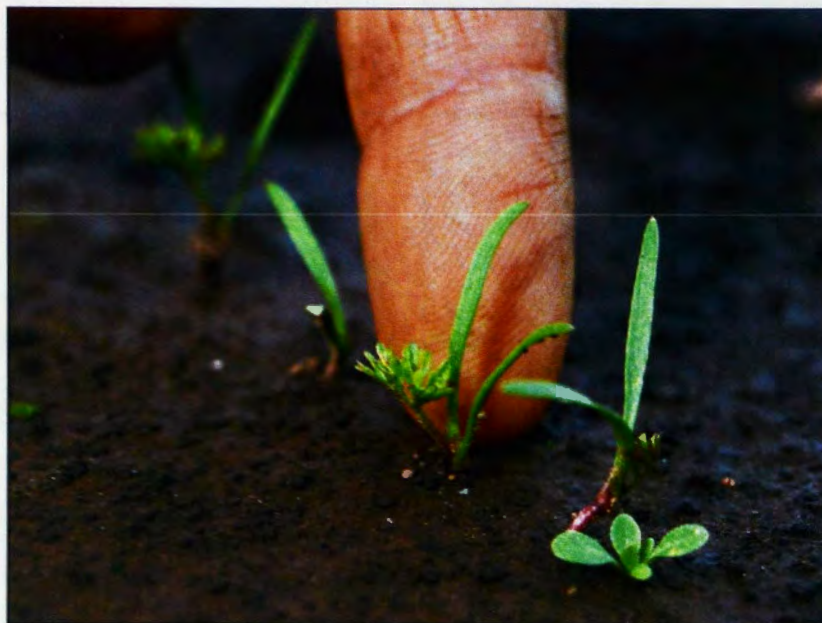
L'Lubatog Nominees Pty Ltd (Apostle Whey Cheese)
Cooriemungle, Victoria

THE RURAL FINANCE SHEEP PRODUCER OF THE YEAR

Millring Pastoral
Toongabbie, Victoria



Bayer CropScience



Cutri Fruit

The Cutri Fruit slogan is "A passion for fruit" – and you soon realise why. "Can we talk and eat?" Gaethan Cutri asked before a tour of the 280 hectare farm at Woorinen, near Swan Hill. "I love stone fruit," he said. "I don't eat much else during stone fruit season."

The Cutri family markets two main lines: Cutri Fruit and Tasti Fruit, which include mostly nectarines plus peaches, apricots and plums. The business tracks how many kilograms of fruit are produced per tree and per hectare, as well as the prices paid and all sales.



Trees are monitored for how many pieces of fruit are grown before and after thinning, and even how many pieces of fruit are grown on each lateral branch.

"We have key performance indicators on different varieties for pruning – how many laterals we want to leave per tree, how many limbs, the length of the laterals; everything we do we've put numbers around," Gaethan said.

The business used to export about 60 per cent of its produce – mostly white nectarines – to Taiwan. It now exports 40 per cent of production to Hong Kong, with 50 per cent sold to Coles and 10 per cent to Safeway. The focus on the domestic market came from Gaethan's belief that it may take years to win back export rights to Taiwan.

He said the only way he could manage such a large farm was to keep it simple. "Consistency, simplicity, everything the same, lots of one variety: these things all make it easy," Gaethan said. Family members also take overseas trips to inspect new varieties and learn from other farmers. Drip irrigation is computer controlled and frost-limiting techniques are used. A pheromone trial is in progress in a bid to deter the pest beetle capophilus. "It's about reducing the chemicals on the product," Gaethan said.

*Gaethan Cutri is also a finalist in the DPI Young Farmer of the Year Award.

THE BAYER CROPSCIENCE HORTICULTURE PRODUCER OF THE YEAR FINALISTS

Elgo Estate – Grant & Suzanne Taresch

This is a story about wind and wine. Of how Elgo Estate, in a possibly world first, is using a wind turbine to harvest enough energy to run its winery. Elgo Estate, near Avenel in the Strathbogie Ranges, is run by Grant and Sue Taresch, who began in the industry 15 years ago with a small vineyard in the same district. Ten years ago, the Taresch family, including Grant's parents – who run a graphic-design business in Melbourne – bought a bigger 1000 hectare farm on the slopes of nearby Upton Hill and set about planting 65 hectares of grapes.

Grant said the property was a farm first and a winery second. "When we bought this farm, it was running 700 wethers and the gullies were eroded and full of rabbits and blackberry," Grant said. With the help of Landcare, the creeks and gullies were fenced off and the eroded areas revegetated. Pastures were renovated and less-productive rocky areas were fenced off and returned to nature. "It is now totally different and we can run 3000 Merino sheep," Grant, who was a wool classer before moving to viticulture, said.

The farm's elevation of 500m suited cool-climate vines. "We don't get frosts," he said. The altitude also proved suitable for a wind turbine, installed recently to power the winery.

The vineyard, planted to Sauvignon Blanc, Riesling, Shiraz and Merlot, produced its first commercial vintage in 2004. About 6000 cases are bottled under the Elgo Estate label and are mostly sold to independent Melbourne retailers. A small percentage is exported. The remaining fruit, equivalent to about 19,000 cases, is sold as bulk wine.



J & D Conti Pty Ltd

Adrian Conti is the third generation of his family to grow fruit on the Murray River at Cobram. The family has two properties in Cobram and another near Griffith, in NSW, growing and packing stone and pome fruit. They grow apples, pears, peaches, plums, nectarines, apricots and persimmons, producing an average 2500 tonnes of fruit per year.



"We have computerised spraying equipment, automated irrigation and automatic tipping, washing, waxing and weight-sizing of fruit," Adrian said. Diversification has been the focus during the past 15 years, moving away from growing fruit mostly for canning to growing peaches and pears for the fresh market, as well as adding apricots, plums and nectarines. "Apples and persimmons have been added to extend our (growing) season."

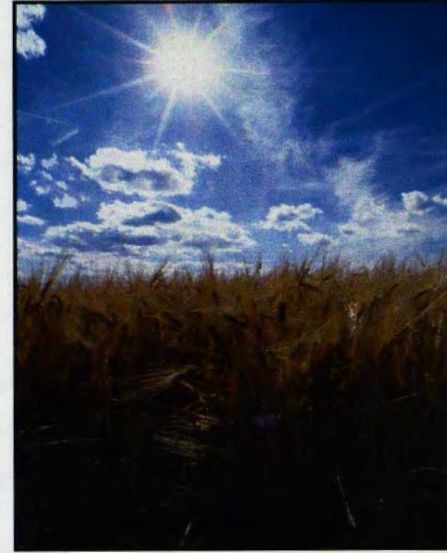
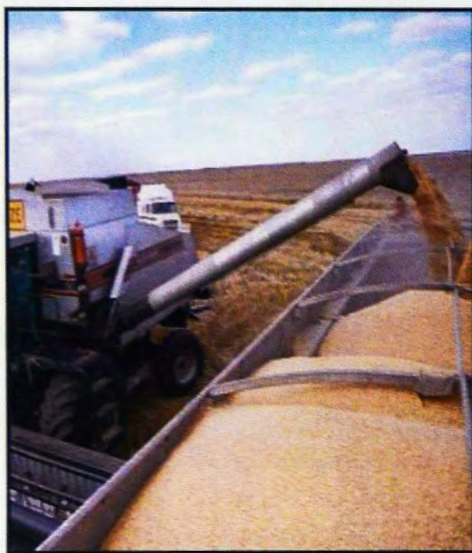
Adrian said Griffith was two weeks earlier in ripening than Cobram. "This gives us the ability to supply a particular variety for almost a month between the two properties," he said.

Two years ago the family designed and built a semi-automatic harvester. It carries up to nine pickers, copes with different levels of fruit, loads and unloads bins, and can auto steer. "We have also invested heavily into trellis," Adrian said. "This gives us uniformity of trees and early-bearing fruit." Adrian said the family was one of the pioneers of Integrated Pest Management, now in its 19th year. "We have recently invested in Grow data software." This records a full spray diary, undertakes stock control, generates planting lists and records production and fertilizer application.

*Adrian Conti is also a finalist in the DPI Young Farmer of the Year Award.

CASE IH

AGRICULTURE



Shaw Pastoral Pty Ltd

In July last year, more than 80 per cent of David and Janet Shaw's Newry property was under water. Two months later, fences had been repaired, debris cleared and the Shaws were quickly back on track. Cropping makes up 90 per cent of the Shaw's enterprise, with emphasis placed on fodder production, including 200 hectares of lucerne. The Shaws run two



properties – one at Newry for irrigation and a 200 hectares dryland farm at Glenmaggie, used predominantly for grain, hay and prime lamb production.

Their enterprise is flexible enough to swing from grain to fodder quickly, depending on seasonal conditions and commodity prices.

"To have that option with the market and season is great," David said. "Last year it all went to hay, while this year it will go to grain as good prices are predicted." Fodder crops include straight lucerne or cereal lucerne mixes, which are becoming a more popular stockfeed due to the balance of protein and energy. Cereals mixed into lucerne crops include triticale, wheat

or oats, which is oversown with a zero-drill combine and helps bulk up the first cut of lucerne. The mixes are easier to sell because they are suitable for both dry and milking cows.

The Shaws have been zero-till cropping for three years and own all their own equipment and trucks. This ensures they can harvest and bale at exactly the right time, and can also deliver lucerne anywhere from south and west Gippsland through to NSW and Queensland.

Canola is sold to Melbourne but all cereal grain produced is purchased by local dairy farmers.

THE CASE IN CROP PRODUCER OF THE YEAR FINALISTS

Nalda Park Pastoral Company

Nathan and Penny Craig are a young couple committed to their fledgling farming enterprise and to building the rural community. The couple, who met while studying Agriculture at Adelaide University, run a sheep and cropping enterprise near Apsley, in the lower West Wimmera Shire. As well as building their farm at Apsley, adding leased land, and building a contracting business and Limousin stud, they are heavily involved in farming groups. Penny also works for Solly Business Services at Naracoorte and is studying for a masters degree in Agricultural Science.

The Craigs farm in partnership with Nathan's parents, Bill and Debbie. Their home block, Nalda Park is 500 hectares and they also lease 900 hectares and manage another 80 hectares. They run 5500 sheep, including 3000 Merino ewes – 1800 mated to Merinos for a self replacing flock and 1200 to terminal sires for prime lambs. The family aims to balance the cropping and sheep enterprises equally in terms of time. "The key is to get crops in early, being able to dry sow," Nathan said. No hard-and-fast rules apply to the no-till crop rotation, but the Craigs try to follow a cereal with a non-stubble crop to minimise sowing difficulties.



To cope with their expanding contracting business, they have bought a secondhand rubber-tracked Cat Challenger 35 and Horwood Bagshaw Simplicity Combo airseeder, to which Nathan has added press wheels and a chemical boom.

"Flexibility is the key to get through these mongrel seasons," Nathan said. "We are doing all we can to lower our costs, make the most of our options and squeeze more from the system."

BJ, JT & MW Veale

A focus on business management has helped Mark and Julie Veale weather the drought. The grain and sheep farmers believe using a business management framework, instead of concentrating solely on production, is helping them through the tough times. Mark said the skills gained through training could be applied in ways not originally intended.



The Veales are the fifth generation to take on the family farm, which also supports Mark's parents. Over the past eight years they have doubled its size to about 1200 hectares and leased another 480 hectares. As well as cropping and sheep operations, the Veales have a few water buffaloes and deer. They also have a 10 hectare agroforestry lot producing veneer timber for the furniture industry. Crops comprise canola, wheat and barley, although some forage oats were sown last year.

Mark and Julie are steering towards biological farming. They have progressively incorporated stubble retention and have set up a business brewing fungi and microbes to produce a "compost tea" for spraying on soils and crops. Mark said the aim was to control diseases, but they eventually wanted to use compost tea to also reduce insect pests and weeds.

He said they had virtually no stripe rust on their kellalac wheat crops in seasons during which neighbours had suffered problems. Their gairdner barley was virtually free of scald and managed to make the malting grade: a rarity in the region.

Canola crops grown in the biological system had the same yields as other crops grown conventionally on the farm but had 2 per cent higher oil content. "I can't put it down to anything else but the microbes," Mark said.

Genetics

AUSTRALIA



WT & KJ Bodman

Bill Bodman had bounce in his step during spring last year. The seasons had finally taken a positive turn for the Won Wron dairy farmer. More than 75mm of rain fell in the region at the same time as milk prices lifted and a silage crop has produced a

bumper yield. "I think we have a reasonable chance of getting out of trouble," Bill said at the time. "This is our chance to regain lost ground... I think it is achievable despite high grain prices."

Bill and his wife, Janie, milk 215 cows off 120 hectares near Yarram in South Gippsland. The silage cut in spring produced 560 rolls last year, compared with a meagre 93 rolls the year before. "We were surprised to get that much on limited rainfall but we had pushed hard with urea since winter when we had some moisture," he said.

The Bodmans, who had below-average rainfall since mid-winter, had resown in autumn with annual and biannual pasture seed to grow more feed. "We planned to push



things hard early in the year and it has paid off," Bill said. "Re-sowing has not only provided better quality pasture for cows but it grows much better silage, too, which is cheaper than buying feed."

The Bodmans expected a hay cut of about 400 rolls. They also trialled a 5 hectare sorghum crop in an attempt to "grow as much dry matter as possible" on a small irrigation licence. Their cows, which produced 32 litres of milk a head last spring, were fed 1.8-2.0 tonnes of dry matter a hectare in 2006, while last year the aim was seven tonnes DM/ha. He said the milk price rise was a confidence booster, "I would be optimistic looking forward," he said.

THE GENETICS AUSTRALIA DAIRY PRODUCER OF THE YEAR FINALISTS

Hamily Pty Ltd

A dry, warm winter and low water levels in major irrigation storages convinced Stanhope dairy farmer Ian Hamono to begin early preparations. "We were heading into the (spring) season with 570 cows and we believed it was too risky," Ian said. Ian and his wife, Mary, decided to sell milking cows to bring their numbers below 500 and use that money to buy extra water and fodder.

By moving early, they secured 700 megalitres and are budgeting on a 30 per cent water allocation of their water right of 800 megalitres. The Hamonos usually use 1100 megalitres but last year 950 megalitres saw them through after Ian devised plans to use the water efficiently.

With help on feed budgeting from the Department of Primary Industries, he grew as much spring feed and cut as much silage as possible. Annual pastures and half the usual permanent pastures have been watered, letting the rest dry before over-sowing in autumn. The move to long-season annuals, which the cows graze from March to November, has proved successful and means Ian doesn't have to water perennials over summer.

Last summer they also stuck to their normal routine of planting 22 hectares of maize, because it is extremely water efficient. In addition, the Hamonos have a feed pad that enables them to buy cheaper feed, such as citrus pulp, kibble and canola meal. The area of perennials was cut to 40 hectares because of the dry but will return to 70 hectares when conditions improve. Ian said cows were on a split diet, getting a morning feed on pasture and a night feed of silage on the feed pad before they go into a dry paddock. "There is an additional cost to this approach but the cost is balanced by the improved quality of feed."



RW Hodge & Son

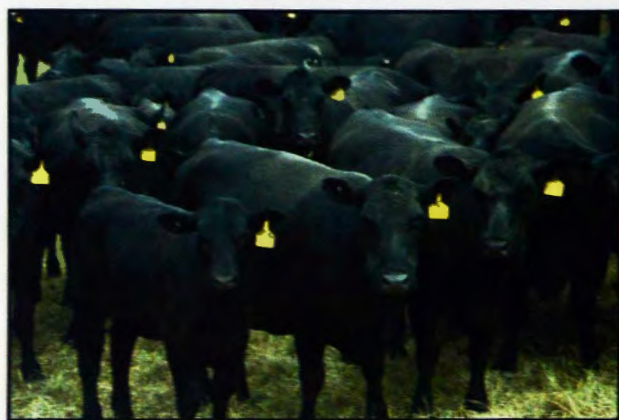
Since shifting from perennial pasture to an annual pasture-based semi-feedlot system, Stuart Hodge has increased herd size almost fivefold in the past 20 years. Cow numbers have jumped from 220 to 1000 on the 430 hectare farm at Numurkah, of which 228 hectares is the milking area. Total milk production in 2006-2007 was 7.329 million litres: about 460,000 litres up on the previous season. "Our number-one goal is to survive the drought at full production," Stuart said.



The farm has been in the Hodge family since 1942 and was changed to dairying in 1982. Annual pastures and summer cropping allow large amounts of feed to be stored as silage. "This silage is then incorporated into a total mixed ration, which is then fed back to the cows when no green feed is available," Stuart said. Green feed is fed either by direct grazing or by harvesting and feeding the "green chop" back to the cows through the TMR in a "cut-and-carry" system.

All replacement stock are agisted at 10 months of age. "Currently we have a significant number of heifers in Tasmania," Stuart said. Cows are milked in a 45-unit rotary dairy which has an automatic identification and a 155m-long undercover feed pad. Fully lasered, the property has a flexible irrigation layout which includes a comprehensive drainage network and a 35-megalitre re-use dam to make the most of a 1441-megalitre water licence. Stuart said there was still room for expansion. "Our future growth will be in milk production per cow and forage production."

THE RAS BEEF PRODUCER OF THE YEAR FINALISTS



PA & MT Kirk

Peter Kirk was quietly pleased with how his drought-survival plan worked out. He managed to keep his beef herd of 350 breeding cows intact while also carrying 290 weaners through the dry on his two Tallangatta farms.



"We have come through the drought with minimal tree losses and the beef herd is intact," Peter said. And after welcome autumn rain, he was able to slip a shovel easily into the topsoil and turn up rich, friable humus teeming with earthworms and other desirable soil biology.

Peter said building topsoil had been a passion of his for a long time, along with caring for remnant vegetation.

He has evolved his own style of land management, influenced in part by attending numerous courses, such as Prograze, Beefcheque and Cattlecare, and forums on soil health, chemical use and European Union accreditation.

The drought, he said, was a wake-up call. "That was when I discovered an environmental-management system pilot program in our region," he said. EMS provides a management framework based on a simple "plan, do, check and act" cycle that achieves continual structured improvement. It covers issues such as business efficiency, environmental and financial risk, natural resource management and

environmental protection.

Peter and his wife, Marie, bought their 101 hectare home block at Georges Creek in 1977 and a 404 hectare farm, Spring Creek, three years later.

They run a closed herd of 350 breeding cows based on Injemira Hereford bloodlines and turn off steers at feedlot-entry liveweights of 430-450kg.

THE RAS BEEF PRODUCER OF THE YEAR FINALISTS

G & J Irvine

Cattle finishers Geoff and Jean Irvine run a full time beef operation, but for only part of the year. "We rest the property for two months in April-May to build a substantial feed wedge ready for when the trading cycle begins again in June," Geoff stated.

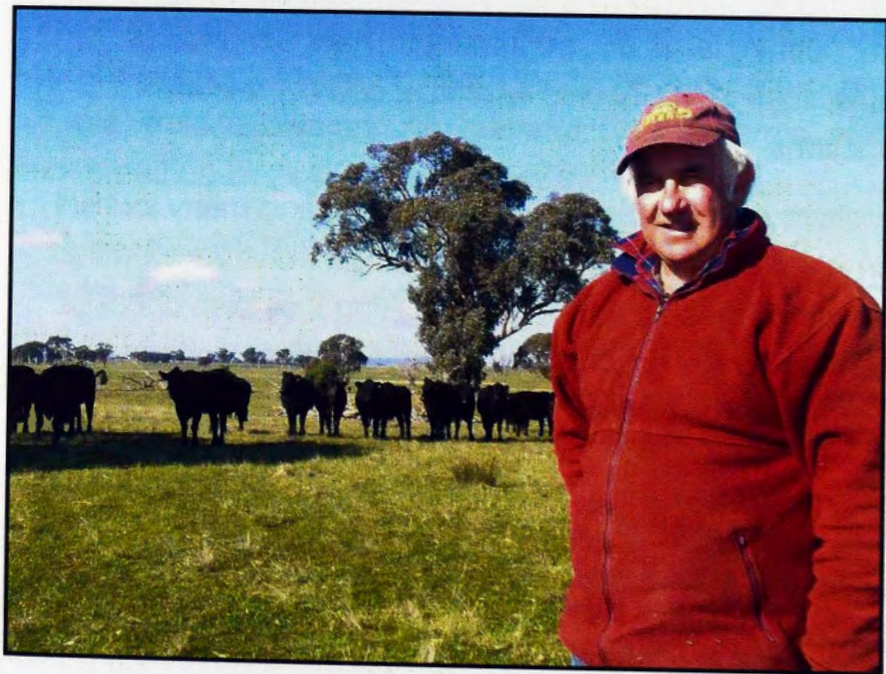
The Irvine's buy store weaner heifers in June at an average 220kg live weight and finish them to an average of 400kg for the domestic market.

Although they farm just 16 hectares near Warragul, their stocking rate is impressive, taking advantage of the normally reliable climate and fertile soils. However below average rainfall in recent years is a cause for concern. "It could mean a reduction in potential stocking rate," Geoff noted. Stocking rate has dropped from 45 to 34 DSE/ha over the past three seasons in line with a fall in rainfall. Beef production last year was 885kg/ha, down from 114kg/ha three years ago, although this has been off set by a lift in average sale prices from \$1.59/kg to \$1.77/kg.



Geoff places a high priority on pasture nutrition and grazing management. "When we bought the property in 1997, it was weed infested with little improved pasture. Since then we have established perennial ryegrass, cocksfoot and white clover pastures and planted 2000 trees for shelter." Fertiliser, mulching and aeration help achieve an annual pasture growth of 14 tonnes/ha and a daily weight gain in the cattle of more than 1kg/day.

Frank Hill



Frank Hill loves putting his bulls to the test. The Heathcote beef producer has his Angus and Salers bulls gene tested in a bid to produce tender beef and improve the marbling content of his herd.

Frank runs 300 Angus-Salers cross breeders on his 600 hectare farm at Heathcote in central Victoria. He uses GeneStar technology to detect marbling and tenderness genes in his bulls. Like any good cattleman, Frank thinks about every facet of his farming. In a poor season, he can run a stocking rate of a cow and calf on 2.4 hectares of his poorest country. With calves last year averaging \$550 at nine months, his return was \$192 a hectare. In a good season in 2001, he averaged \$700 for his calves, returning \$264/ha. Frank also runs first-cross ewes on his best country at 2.4/ha.

Cattle provide 80 per cent of Frank's income and lamb 20 per cent. "I try and produce as much meat as I can at the highest quality I can," Frank noted.

Using the GeneStar technology of Brisbane based company Genetic Solutions, Frank sends hair samples from his bulls to detect tenderness and marbling characteristics. Frank attends sales of different breeds throughout the year and searches for GeneStar results alongside the estimated breed values in the catalogue. "What I'm doing is using all the tools at my disposal to breed the most tender beef I can."