

STRONG HOPES FOR THE FUTURE AT CONGUPNA

With all the problems and setbacks facing the dairy industry in the north of the state at the moment, it is very refreshing to have a yarn with a couple who have a really positive outlook on the industry and are just focussed on getting on with the job and doing things as efficiently as they can.

Rob and Barb Church are milking 400 cows on a 20 double-up herringbone shed on their property on the Congupna East Road at Congupna. They have been at this place for ten years, coming from Invergordon, where they had farmed for 20 years.

Over the years they have built up their holdings in the area to a total of around 1200 acres.

The cows are mainly Holsteins, but Rob has introduced some cross-breeds, looking for increased longevity.

They have just purchased a new property about 2 kms south, with a 50 stand rotary, and are looking forward to moving the cows onto that more efficient shed. Barb says that they "get frustrated at times waiting for some of the slow milkers – that'll be fixed on the new shed, we'll just send them around again."

The new block doesn't come with a water right, but as Rob says, "Once we get rolling we'll buy water back in. We are looking to build the herd up to 650 milkers."



ROB AND BARB CHURCH OF CONGUPNA ARE PLANNING TO BUILD THEIR HERD UP TO 650 COWS WITH THE ACQUISITION OF MORE LAND NEARBY AND A MORE EFFICIENT DAIRY.

They have bought standing hay this season. "We mow and rake it then get a contractor in to bale it; the same goes with the silage we do on our other blocks. We get a contractor from Gippsland to chop and cart it for us."

This year they have already put 2000 tonnes of fine-chopped silage into bunkers.

They have a 500 megalitre water right on the Goulburn-Murray Water system with a current allocation of 41%, but have been watering only in the autumn for the last three years, on ryegrass and shaftal clover. "On the dry blocks we have gone away from ryegrass to cereal silage, mainly triticale."

"You have to change with the times," says Rob. "We bought a feed mixer two years ago and it's paid for itself by now. We built a cement feed pad and there is very little wastage."

The Churches bought in feed last year for the mixer, but have ruled that out for this year. They are making do with their own silage, grass and hay.

"Last year was our best year ever," explains Barb. "There has been only one year in the time we've been dairying that we have dropped in production, every other year has been a plus on the one before."

A FAMILY AFFAIR

The Churches work as a strong family team; their eldest son, Darren, is full-time on the farm. He lives close by with his wife Chris and their three children. Rob, Barbara and Darren look after the milking and Rob raises the calves.

Bradley, their youngest son, was just married in mid-November and with his new bride, Renee, will move into the house

on the new block. Brad is a gas fitter in Shepparton but comes over at 4am to bring the cows up to the shed, milks, then heads home for a shower and off to work. In the afternoon he is back at the dairy to help with other jobs to be done.

Rob and Barb also have a daughter, Paula, who lives in Shepparton and is married to Greg Montgomery, with one child, and they are also willing to help whenever it's needed.

"Family dairy farms will keep going if everybody is dedicated," Rob contends. "The boys thrive on it. ("Just like their father," adds Barb). Dairying is the whole life here."

GOOD BLOKES AT GREENHAMS

They have been sending their cull cows to Greenhams ever since the plant started up in Tongala.

"When we were at Invergordon, Greenham's used to come and pick them up on-farm, now we take them up on a Tuesday, three at a time in the trailer, to Les Mitchell at the Invergordon liveweight scales.

"We've been building numbers up here, so we've just been getting rid of old cows and mastitis cows. Sometimes we take up two loads a day; it depends on what's happening. We send about 50 or 60 cows a year to Greenham.

"Les is a good bloke, we have a few laughs and a joke – and it's important that Greenham are putting money back into the community. Not only with the footy clubs, but other local causes."

Rob and Barbara are planning for their retirement in a few years, moving to a new home that they have built over near Katandra. It is obvious that the family farm will remain in good and enthusiastic hands.

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Victorian

MEATWORKS MESSENGER

DECEMBER 2009

GREENHAM



Closing two of the four shifts at Tongala recently is probably the toughest decision I have ever had to make in my business career.

Reducing staff numbers is never easy but it was particularly difficult with a workforce largely made up of locals who have always displayed great commitment and loyalty – something that isn't so common in the big smoke.

In return and as part of our commitment to the region we have always tried to be a good corporate citizen and support as many community groups as possible – and we will continue to do so.

That's why it was such a tough decision. But there was no choice – the cattle simply aren't there and we all know it's likely to take some time for numbers to rebuild.

The spirit of the Goulburn Valley community really shone through at the time. I greatly appreciated the understanding that was so widely evident, especially in Tongala where the effects will be most felt. Regional councils and local parliamentarians were also very understanding of the situation and made a great effort to assist our retrenched workers.

The response highlighted the difference between country and city communities and reinforced my decision to build our abattoir in the Goulburn Valley and not elsewhere.

In the last newsletter around midyear I said it was hard to tell where the season was going. I wondered whether the pattern of previous years was changing because there had been some decent falls at that stage.

But I also commented that Professor Toshio Yamagata, who had accurately forecast previous dry spells, was saying that the spring rains in south eastern Australia would fail. Thankfully he was wrong because apart from a dry patch in November our spring hasn't been too bad.

It does make you wonder just how much notice we should take of forecasts about future weather events.

While the season has been better for dairy farmers, this year prices have been abysmal, but as we round out the year there are some signs of international recovery. Let's hope that 2010 brings the ultimate combination – great rains and good prices.

Peter Greenham

TONGALA PLANT GOING STRONG

After scaling back from four shifts per day to two in early October our Tongala processing plant is now operating strongly with a workforce of around 120. It has even been necessary to work some overtime in recent weeks when cattle numbers have exceeded the daily capacity of 350.

Previous capacity with all four shifts working was 680 per day.

We talk about the Tongala plant as a single unit but it's actually two completely separate killing lines in their own buildings but sharing support resources such as holding pens.

PLANNING FOR GROWTH

When cutting the number of shifts in half we had the option of either maintaining one shift in each plant, or mothballing one of the plants and continuing to run two shifts in the other.

We chose to keep both plants operating with a single shift so that we can very easily increase production when more cattle become available. It's very easy to add overtime to the current single shift on each line, and it is also easy to introduce a second shift as numbers increase.

We believe cattle numbers will grow again over time and we didn't want to be in the difficult position of having to bring a mothballed killing line back into production. Even with good maintenance, buildings and equipment deteriorate when they aren't being used. Getting them back into working order again is never a quick task.

Livestock manager, Adam Pretty, reports that all 17 buying centres across northern Victoria are feeding cattle into the plant. However, numbers are still well below what we had come to expect as normal.

But he is successfully maintaining throughput by sourcing cattle from Gippsland where we now have a liveweight buying operation, and from the western district, as well as South Australia. A few are trickling in from northern Australia.

DEMAND STRONG

At the other end of the operation, US demand for the Tongala's grinding meat remains strong despite the difficulties with the economy. In some ways an economic downturn can be helpful – it's easier to sell hamburger meat than prime steaks during a recession.

We have a long standing relationship with our US customer and are very confident of the future in that market. We're also confident that throughput, and therefore workforce numbers, will increase again at the plant but it is difficult to predict timing.

In the meantime it operates strongly and we continue to compete vigorously for farmers' cattle.



WE WISH ALL OF OUR CUSTOMERS A MERRY CHRISTMAS AND A HAPPY NEW YEAR



THE CHURCH FAMILY WORK AS A STRONG TEAM AND ROB BELIEVES THAT FAMILY DAIRY FARMS WILL KEEP GOING IF EVERYBODY IS DEDICATED.

THRIVING ON THE CHALLENGES

Rob talks about their optimistic attitude towards dairying: "The prospects now are pretty good and I like a challenge," Barb chimes in with "...he thrives on it."

It shows on the work and improvements that they have done around the place, including lasering all the paddocks, as it was pretty run-down when they bought it. As part of his ongoing learning curve about doing things better, Rob enjoys attending organised farm walks and field days.

OUR SCHOLARSHIP IS ON AGAIN

Applications are now open for the 2010 Greenham Dairy Scholarship for family, sharefarmers and employees of farmers who supply cattle to the Tongala plant.

The award has been going since 2000 and provides the opportunity for motivated students across a broad age range to undertake further education related to any sector of the dairy industry.

Open to anyone between the ages of 17 and 45, the scholarship gives students the chance to apply for

\$10,000 to help them undertake formal study or a recognised training program relating to the industry.

Our livestock co-ordinator Adam Pretty said that the company plays an important part in the local dairy

community, and ongoing education of the type offered by the scholarship is vital to the industry's future.

"This scholarship reflects the company's long-standing commitment

to both the district and the Australian dairy industry.

"It is designed to identify students and younger people with the potential to make a significant contribution to the dairy industry, but who may find it difficult without financial support."

Applicants can use the scholarship to undertake farming-related courses, or studies related to any other sector of industry that ultimately benefits dairying. Tips for applicants, further information and application forms can be downloaded from www.greenham.com.au

Past winners of the Greenham Dairy Scholarship have pursued their interests in large herd veterinary issues, soil and pasture management, business and environmental management, animal sciences, breeding excellence and dairy technology.

The Scholarship is awarded on a range of criteria including:

- How the applicant will use the money to improve their skills and knowledge
- The scholarship's importance in helping them realise their ambitions

PREVIOUS GREENHAM DAIRY SCHOLARSHIP WINNERS:

- 2001 – Leo Phelan, Numurkah
- 2002 – Matt McCready, Tatura
- 2003 – Lisa Thompson, Dookie College
- 2004 – Courtney Gronow, Yarrowalla
- 2005 – Ben Govett, Dingee
- 2006 – Robert Bonanno, Marionvale
- 2007 – Ross Lister, Calivil
- 2008 – Clancy Burn, Mount Schank
- 2009 – Simone Lee, Mathoura

- Potential benefits to the dairy industry or farm enterprise and
- Previous academic, industry and/or personal achievements.

The winner will be selected by an independent panel, comprising representatives from education, community and the dairy industry.

Applications close on Friday, January 29, 2010.

Greenham Dairy Scholarship application forms and information sheets are available by phoning Jenny Andrews at Rivergum Marketing on (03) 5445 6103, faxing a request to (03) 5442 5301 or e-mailing to greenham@rivergummarketing.com.au



MEAT THE STAFF – GRAEME HARRISON

Graeme Harrison is the maintenance manager at Tongala, having taken over the role in March 2007 when the previous manager, Don McDonald, retired.

Graeme started with Greenham 15 years ago, soon after the plant was commissioned. At that time he was working on the afternoon shift. "We were working on general maintenance and fixing problems as they arose. Don McDonald was the engineer in charge and there were two blokes on each shift, plus a welder in the back shed."

He lives at Stanhope and worked with Bonlac as an A-grade electrician at the milk factory before shifting to Blayney in NSW as a trade assistant. When the chance arrived to work at the Tongala abattoir he grabbed it with both hands.

He supervises a "sparkie and a fitter and a general maintenance bloke" on the one shift now that starts at 6am and finishes at 2pm.

Graeme works out of an office behind the main office building, reporting to Peter Greenham and Grant Ryan. He says that he enjoys working with his bosses, because you know where you stand with them.

"We mainly look after the pneumatic tools, the hydraulic platforms, electrical saws and refrigeration plant, to try to make sure there's no trouble. We do a lot of preventative maintenance so there's as little downtime as possible. When I started in the office we didn't have a computer here, but now that we have one, it makes it so much easier to manage the maintenance schedules and jobs."

He's a keen golfer and a member of Valley View as well as serving on the committee of the Stanhope footy club where he is involved with recruiting and selection.

He and Sharon have three grown sons who like a lot of others have moved away from the bush. The eldest, Joel is a surveyor in Melbourne, Todd is in the irrigation business in Perth, and the youngest, Kyle is with a furniture manufacturer at Bayswater.



WHAT'S THE 2004 WINNER UP TO?

Courtney Gronow won the 2004 Greenham Dairy Scholarship when he was living and working on his parents' dairy farm in the Yarrowalla district, near Pyramid Hill, milking around 400 cows.

At that time he was about to start a degree in Agricultural Science at La Trobe University, hoping to add Business to the course, making it a double degree.

So, we thought we should ask the question: "Where is he now?"

Courtney is working as a dairy business consultant in Shepparton at Agrilink Farm Stats Pty Ltd, which is a part of Dairy Business Centre.

Last year he completed his Ag Science Degree and Bachelor of Business, majoring in financial management. And that has become his real interest and the focus of his work with the Dairy Business Centre.

He has been there since July this year and is working three days a week as he completes his Master of Agricultural

Science degree through the University of Melbourne.

An 'Industry Placement Scholarship' offered by Dairy Australia sponsors Courtney's two days each week of academic study. Dairy Australia says this initiative aims to provide the dairy industry with high calibre graduates to work on projects that will improve on-farm aspects of the industry's global competitiveness.

The director of Dairy Business Centre, Gordon Cleary, says that Courtney was recommended to their business by the university because the nature of the position dovetails perfectly with Courtney's interests, skills and qualifications. He is specifically looking at risk analysis of different dairy farm production systems within the Northern Irrigation Region.

After graduation Courtney worked in the stockfeeds industry as a nutritionist which he says was 100% field work.



'WITH A DOUBLE DEGREE UNDER HIS BELT, 2004 GREENHAM SCHOLARSHIP WINNER COURTNEY GRONOW IS NOW WORKING ON HIS MASTERS.'

Dairy Business Centre's work is generally on two fronts; working with regular farm clients on prescribed work to assist them in meeting the challenges of modern dairy farming, and project work involving mainly research for Dairy Australia. Gordon says that Courtney's work is spread between the two areas with a focus on statistical analysis.

"Courtney joined the firm in a strengthening climate of confidence."

INVERGORDON LIVEWEIGHT SCALES

George Drew has had the Greenham liveweight scales on his property at Invergordon for about 13 years now; as he says, "just a year or so after Greenhams opened in Tongala". He gave up dairy farming in 1983 and now concentrates on the vegie garden which is looking very lush at the moment. Les Mitchell has been manning the station for seven years.

In the photo, Les and George check out a cow that Stewart Cameron has brought in from his farm on Union Road, Invergordon.



CHRISTMAS HOURS: OVER THE HOOKS

Receival of over the hooks cattle to Tongala will cease on Tuesday 22 December, noon, and resume at 7am Monday 4 January 2010.

CHRISTMAS HOURS: LIVEWEIGHT BUYING

Monday 21 Dec 9am-noon

Tongala – John Van Roy 5859 0912
Stanhope – Neville Mackrell 0428 570 523
Bamawm – Les Mitchell 0409 079 541

Tuesday 22 Dec 9am-noon

Tongala – John Van Roy 5859 0912
Invergordon – Les Mitchell 0409 079 541

Wednesday 23 Dec 9am-noon

Tongala – John Van Roy 5859 0912
No Liveweight Scales

Thursday 24 Dec 9am-noon

Tongala – John Van Roy 5859 0912
No Liveweight Scales

Friday 25 Dec

Christmas Day – Public Holiday

Monday 28 Dec

Boxing Day – Public Holiday

Tuesday 29 Dec 9am-noon

Tongala – John Van Roy 5859 0912
Invergordon – Les Mitchell 0409 079 541

Wednesday 30 Dec 9am-noon

Tongala – John Van Roy 5859 0912
Picola/Waia – Les Mitchell 0409 079 541

Thursday 31 Dec 9am-noon

Tongala – John Van Roy 5859 0912
Sandmount – Les Mitchell 0409 079 541

Friday 1 Jan

New Year's Day – Public Holiday

On Farm Buying Liveweight

Peter Shellie 0428 579 087

Gunbower, Cohuna, Leitchville and Kerang
Thomas Mackenzie 0408 500311

Cohuna and Leitchville

Colin Ibbs 0427 349648

Numurkah

Danny McNamara 0417 541 320

For more information on selling cattle liveweight other than times stated please contact Adam Pretty on 0419 599 761, Bruce Child on 0428 579 884 or HW Greenham office 5859 0912.