



Thursday, February 28, 2019

Ever 'wundered' how other farmers farm?

Over a period of 20 years, Yorke Peninsula farmers Ben and Belinda Wundersitz have increased their cropping program by a massive 1200 per cent.

It was partly a leap of faith, partly a necessity to remain viable that led to the expansion and along the way they have learned plenty about lease farming, branching into new cropping practices and taking an honest look at benchmarking to enable growth.

Ben will share some of his experiences with a first-hand insight into his farm business model as keynote guest speaker at the Getting The Crop In seminar hosted by the Hart Field-Site Group in Clare on Wednesday, March 13.

A fifth-generation farmer from Maitland, Ben runs the property Anna Binna with wife Belinda, employing five full time staff and up to five casuals during peak seasons.

The property spans from Price to Port Victoria and ranges from 280-millimetre rainfall to 500mm with a rotation focussed on high protein wheat, malt barley and lentils.

Ben attributes much of the business's growth to the introduction of lentils into the rotation, especially in areas traditionally considered too dry for sustainable continuous cropping.

"We've been growing lentils for 20 years and they can be as much as a third of our program," he said.

"We're growing lentils in areas that people told us wasn't possible, they said we'd go broke.

"But we can grow them earlier and earlier without getting smashed by frost – it's a big part of the success of this crop but no one really realised back then."

Ben and Belinda began expanding Anna Binna's operations originally through contract harvesting and sowing before branching into leasing land, at the same time more than doubling the land they own.

"Originally we were leasing land for 1-2pc of the price of land and we could make money doing that," Ben said.

"Had we bought land at that time we'd either be the same size now or maybe not farming any more.

"We share farmed two properties in the area and then over the next 15 years this expanded to leasing nine properties and purchasing another four."

With the massive expansion came the need to take an honest look at their business model, occupational health and safety and succession planning, with the help of an advisory board.

"I resisted benchmarking and really didn't want to know about it," Ben said.

"But it has turned out to provide us some of the most powerful data for our business.

“It showed a lot of what we thought were our strengths were actually our weaknesses.

“We had 30pc of the staff we actually needed and some of our machinery was on the edge of breaking down and falling apart.

“We run a lean, mean operation, but in some areas it was too lean to be sustainable.

“The reality is in those early days I was really running the property by the seat of my pants.”

Ben says they still run a “lean, mean” operation, but now with the right focus.

“We have embraced the deregulation of the grain markets with strong forward sales and hedging of all commodities,” he said.

“To keep the cost of production down all of the inputs are purchased locally with a focus on buying in bulk while targeting the lower end of the pricing cycles.

“And early adoption of precision guidance systems has enabled Anna Binna to operate most of its plant and equipment 24 hours a day which has given to very efficient use of expensive machinery.”

With the growth of the property and the responsibilities that come with it, the need to look after their most important commodity – themselves – has been realised by Ben and Belinda who are actively involved in the Fat Farmers rural health initiative, along with numerous other community committees.

“I learnt that we really need to maintain ourselves like we maintain our machinery,” Ben said.

“Fat Farmers is just a really good outlet and a chance to catch up with others.

“I’m not super fit but I enjoy the fitness and it’s good to head to the gym, talk to some other blokes and go for a coffee afterwards.

“I guess it’s a bit like we used to do on a Friday night catching up in the pub.”

Hear more from Ben as well as the challenges of soil residual herbicides, the 2018 Hart trials results, the autumn-winter climate outlook for South Australia, and international commodity markets updates at the Hart Field-Site Group’s Getting The Crop In seminar.

The free event sponsored by Rabobank kicks off on Wednesday, March 13, with breakfast platters, tea and coffee from 8am, sessions starting at 8.30am through until 12.15pm at The Influencers Church, Stradbroke Road, Clare (northern end of the racecourse).

For more information and to register for Getting The Crop In, see the Hart Field-Site Group website www.hartfieldsite.org.au

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