

Welcome to the Autumn Edition

In recent weeks many parts of Victoria and southern NSW have experienced some promising autumn rainfall as preparation is now underway for the 2017 cropping season. On the back of a bumper harvest and exceptional livestock prices Meridian Agriculture wishes all its clients a productive and profitable 2017 season.

Wishing you and your family a safe and happy Easter.



Warren Blyth

Finance in Feb & Assessment in April

During the month of February the Meridian Agriculture team put the focus on finance in farm businesses. The campaign and hashtag #FinanceinFeb was an initiative of Meridian Agriculture's People & Business Team and was designed to stimulate people's thinking about the allocation of financial resources. Daily tips, facts and advice were published on both Facebook and Twitter to raise awareness of the importance of managing the farm finances well. For more information and to see these facts and tips please visit the 'Finance in February' page on our website <http://www.meridian-ag.com.au/financeinfeb/>

April will also see the release of another campaign titled #AssessmentinApril which will encourage clients and potential clients to review, renew, update or commence their succession planning. Keep an eye out on our website and social media for more daily facts and advice.

Be sure to follow us on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/meridianag/> and Twitter https://twitter.com/meridian_ag to keep updated on further campaigns.

Whether you are looking to invest profits, borrow money or assess the currency of your succession plan, Meridian Agriculture can assist in assessing your options. Call us on 03 5341 6100 to discuss.

Article by Ben Reeve

Future Livestock Consulting Internship

About four years ago our team at Meridian Agriculture became concerned that, largely due to the reduction in staffing levels within state agriculture departments, there was a genuine shortage of positions available for people who want to become livestock consultants.

We decided to talk to the MLA Donor Company (MLA DC) and other consulting firms to see if by working together we could offer early career positions to a group of graduates or recent graduates.

Almost two years ago we signed a contract which has allowed eight participating livestock consulting firms and the MLA DC to work collaboratively to employ nine Future Livestock Consultant Interns. Those interns and their employers, scattered throughout Australia, are close to completing the second and final year of the inaugural program.

Early in March this year we received approval from MLA DC to recruit a further ten interns (and their employers) for a second intake.

During the two year internship, interns will undertake the Grad Cert in Agricultural Consulting at UNE and participate in five workshops where they undergo training which is specifically useful to them as future consultants. In addition they have regular webinars and tele-conferences as a group and as individuals with Ben Reeve (Meridian Agriculture) who manages the project.

Our thanks to the staff at MLA and the Donor Company, to the employers and especially the interns, all of whom have worked with such dedication to ensure that the first program was a success.

Thanks too to MLA for backing the second intake of the program.

For more information about the program contact Ben Reeve via breeve@meridian-ag.com.au



LIVESTOCK
CONSULTING INTERNSHIP

Article by Mike Stephens

ACE Pilot Program

There's something quite special about working with groups. The ACE Program which was piloted by Meridian Agriculture and Rabobank with a group of Hamilton sheep and beef producers this past 12 months was no exception. The pilot was one of ten groups run nationally under MLA's recently released Profitable Grazing Systems project. The group of eight businesses at Hamilton participated in seven half-day sessions focussed on business performance and management. The activities included:

- Whole-farm business financial health check;
- Comparative analysis of individual business performance against Farm Monitor Project benchmarks at whole-farm and enterprise level;
- Development of business action plans aimed at addressing weaknesses and capturing opportunities identified by each business;
- Gaining greater insight into the "lender's perspective", the role of debt within the business and assessing its impacts;
- Bringing about change. Exposure to how other businesses have done it and barriers to change that may need to be overcome.

Some meaty topics you might agree! So what about the group environment? Does working through topics like this really work in a group? If you were to ask me I'd say it's the only way. A small group environment is a team environment. This is essential! In a group environment you will hear how others are dealing with, or have dealt with similar issues. Participants don't need to divulge information they don't feel comfortable sharing. But the group discussion and work-shopping of topics provide a broader perspective for participants and clarity on how the information relates to their own businesses.

As the program facilitator, ACE has been an absolute pleasure to be a part of. If you are interested in being part of a similar group please let us know as we intend to run more groups in the future.

To share with you some of the thoughts and impacts of the program we interviewed two participants from the pilot program. Thank you to Bobbie McLean and Mark Fraser for providing your perspectives. We hope you enjoy their insights. Now that the pilot is finished their group is currently looking at different options to continue as a discussion group in 2017. We wish them all the best in their future endeavors!

Bobbie McLean



Bobbie & Angus McLean

Where do you farm? Coojar, VIC another block south of Harrow, VIC.

How long have you farmed there? Angus's Grandfather was a soldier settler. He passed the farm onto his son, then we moved back in 2005 and Angus took over. The Harrow block was purchased in October 2014.

What enterprises do you run?

- Fine wool merinos
- Black angus cattle
- Harrow – prime lambs

What was your initial interest in joining the pilot Ace Program group? Sam Dohle (Rabobank) called and we said 'you beauty!'

Further education for ourselves, I (Bobbie) had no major ag experience, managing dealing with debt, being conscious that we need to make our money work for us, learning how to make the farm profitable and the implications that has, learning how to make the business and finance structures work to their advantage and if they are not how to attempt to solve the problems and manage through them.

What's been the most valuable part of the program for you? Content and the delivery has been nice and easy and flexible, all comfortable to discuss whatever is put on the table, no sugar coating it at all and we are all looking for more beyond this program. Real tangible kind of information and recognition that we are all in different stages of our businesses, we can see light at the end of the tunnel when we have a clear understanding of our current position, where we want to be and then working through how we get there.

What aspects have you enjoyed most? Being able to talk to other people and being able to put it into practice between each session, can think about things as it happens. We could not understand this level of content and effectively implement it if you did a full block of it in a week like most other courses. Using it now to make decisions in the business and embed the elements into day-to-day management, in an easily achievable process to implement it all. Knowing that there is support in James to call to ask if needed and help with reminders etc. is very beneficial and has helped us build confidence and know that we are not in it alone.

Has business management been influenced in any specific areas? SWOT analysis and moving that to an action plan, using partial budgets on developing that action plan and being able to prioritise areas and action them. One example is that we didn't think we could afford an electrodip, but after having worked through the process with our bank, budgeting well and knowing that we have support, helped us realise that it was a smart decision. Also, getting comfortable with debt to grow the business. Working through what is going to be viable for the lifestyle we want, as well as building a sustainable business.

Over the next 5 years, what are the two biggest things your business will aim to focus on to achieve your longer-term objectives? Infrastructure development at the Harrow block (which will lead to proper paddock/soil fertility management for better pastures etc.).

ACE Program cont.

Maintain our work life balance whilst achieving all of this.

Would you recommend the Ace Program to other farming businesses? Absolutely!

Mark Fraser



Mark Fraser

Where do you farm? We (Mark & Katherine Fraser, and Rob & Heather Fraser) have 2 blocks currently, one at north Byaduk and the other at Macarthur.

How long have you farmed there? Our family settled at north Byaduk in 1880 and we purchased the block at Macarthur coming up three years ago.

What enterprises do you run? We run a mixed enterprise with merino and first cross ewes along with merino wethers, Angus cattle and cereal and summer cropping. We also lease some land out for blue gum plantations.

What was your initial interest in joining the pilot Ace Program group? I was well aware that my handle on the financial side of my business wasn't my strongest point and saw the ACE program as a way of working on this. I was also liked the idea of benchmarking to see how our business compares to others.

What's been the most valuable part of the program for you? For me, the most valuable part of the program has been the business health check. It was a very easy way to see how our business is tracking year to year and gives you some goals to aim for.

What aspects have you enjoyed most? Although I was apprehensive about what the results might show, I thoroughly enjoyed the benchmarking work we did with Paul Blackshaw and the farm monitor project. It highlighted some very positive points to my business, but also gave me some things to work on which is good for motivation.

Has participation in the program had any direct impacts on your business? I am more aware of the weaknesses in our business and I'm putting together a plan to address these. In particular, the consequences of a potential disease outbreak and the impact it will have on our business. The program has also given me motivation to work harder on the little things to improve overall business profitability.

Has business management been influenced in any specific areas? I am now looking more closely where I spend money to ensure I get the best return. We plan on doing an annual business health check to see how we are tracking year to year and see if we are improving and/or hitting our targets.

Over the next 5 years, what are the two biggest things your business will aim to focus on to achieve your longer term objectives? We are placing a big emphasis on debt reduction to maximise opportunities for our business to grow and expand. But also maximising the return on investment for money we invest back into our business.

Would you recommend the Ace Program to other farming businesses? I would not hesitate to recommend the Ace Program to any other farming business.

Article by James Whale (ACE Program Facilitator) & Interviews by Dan Korff

Performance Management

Businesses often time performance and salary reviews for the end of the financial year, but planning for these processes needs to start now.

Here are some key aspects and approaches that we recommend:

- Conduct the salary and performance reviews separately. Regardless of how well the employee has performed and the positive feedback you give them, if you don't give a pay rise at the same time they could think they have not performed well enough. Review salary in line with budgeting and business capacity. While reviewing performance at a different time of year, making it a specifically focused business practice. If this means moving your performance review to another time of year, do it.
- Base the review on things that are within an employee's control. The best grain yields and lamb/calf marking results, can be affected by seasonal events that are no reflection of the employee's performance. Instead, consider focusing on your employee's response (in terms of activity) to managing these challenges. This gives you something to reflect on rather than throwing your hands in the air stating there was nothing we could do.
- Base performance criteria around both the values of the business and specific business goals. If you value tidiness, or punctuality, or communication; use these as a basis for your discussion. In addition, if the business has plans to expand, increase production, or reign in on costs, make x% profit, set criteria associated with these areas.
- A review should be just that – a review of the employee's performance over the year passed. Main issues should be discussed closer to the time they arise, not held onto for this discussion, potentially leading to the issue becoming even more of a problem.
- Say Thanks. Surprising? It is often communicated to us from job seekers and dissatisfied employees that a lack of appreciation shown by employers lies behind to their decision to seek other employment.

Let's get to know Paul Blackshaw



Paul is a Farm Business Advisor with Meridian Agriculture. We asked Paul to answer a few questions about himself.

You have had a broad exposure to many different agricultural enterprises which one would you like to run and why? At the moment a sheep or cattle enterprise would be pretty good, and I particularly like cattle. Cropping is also very technically interesting and in fact we do some share cropping on our own place.

What do you think is the biggest opportunity currently for businesses in Australian Agriculture? Making the most of current strong prices for most of our commodities by planning for the future and setting up your business to be more resilient, productive and profitable for many years.

Tell us about your family and values that are important to your family life? My wife Bernie and I have a son at Uni now, so the place is much quieter. We have a strong work-life balance and appreciate spending time with the extended family.

Where did you go to school?

One of around 20 students at Ellinbank Primary, then Warragul High School. I studied at Dookie College as a mature age student.

What is the most important lesson you have learned in life? Never make assumptions.

What is your favourite holiday destination? I don't really like the cold, so we traditionally escape somewhere warm in the winter and have visited many places in SE Asia and the Pacific, but now tend to gravitate to family on the Sunshine Coast. We also enjoy taking our caravan out for shorter trips.

When growing a business, what is the first piece of advice you would give someone? Make informed decisions using as much data as you can, but also acknowledge that everyone's personality, aims and aspirations will also influence what they ultimately decide.

What do you do outside of work? I follow Harness Racing closely with an active involvement as a breeder and owner and very occasional driver. I also enjoy a fairly slow game of tennis and even slower bike ride.

Why did you choose to work for Meridian Agriculture? I was looking to branch out into a consulting role and had enjoyed working with many of the Meridian team in the past, and liked their philosophies and approach to the business.

Performance Management Cont.

- The performance reviews should not come as a surprise to employees. Ensure they know about the review, when it will be held, and the plans, activities and performance criteria to be discussed.
- Performance reviews are also a great time to review position descriptions, ensuring they are still relevant for the role being undertaken. Allow employees to have input to the content of their position description. This builds engagement and a clearer understanding of their role.

Meridian Agriculture works with a number of businesses to facilitate and manage the performance review process. Please call 03 5341 6100 to discuss options and seek advice for your business.



Article by Ben Reeve

Fertiliser Precision

Precision application of fertiliser is one way of getting better value from your fertiliser dollar.

Over the last few years we have written extensively about the value of variable rate fertiliser application in grazing paddocks.

There can be large variations in nutrient levels across paddocks due to various reasons. Two main factors for changes in nutrient levels include changes in soil types and the movement of dung and urine to stock camps.

Meridian Agriculture has teamed with Precision Agriculture from Ballarat to offer a nutrient mapping program that identifies zones of fertiliser and lime application.

Samples are taken on a grid basis and the results processed to produce maps that can be used to instruct your spreader to apply the required product in the right place.

The results from paddock nutrient mapping often show that nutrients are in good supply at the top of the paddock and deficient at the bottom. Taking one sample across a paddock can result in deficiencies being hidden due to the masking of low values in one area by high values in other areas

If you would like further information, please contact the Yendon office on 03 5341 6100.

Article by Jim Shovelton

Yendon

a 96 Harbours Road,
Yendon, VIC 3352

p 03 5341 6100 | f 03 5341 7630

e info@meridian-ag.com.au

Casterton

a PO Box 226, 32 Henty Street,
Casterton, VIC 3311

p 03 5581 2826 | f 03 5581 2746

e info@meridian-ag.com.au

Hay

a 95 Lachlan Street
Hay, NSW 2711

p 0427 931 177

e info@meridian-ag.com.au