



JOSH AND PERI MCINTOSH
AND THEIR 7 CHILDREN

BORDER PARK ORGANICS

SUCCESSION PLANNING IS A DIFFICULT ISSUE FOR ANY FAMILY BUSINESS.

Faced with the decision to retire from their farm property of over 40 years, John and Jenny Schwarz of 'Border Park', Taplan entered a unique agreement to ensure the ongoing operation of the farm under organic management.

The arrangement also saw the start of a new journey for NSW couple Josh and Peri McIntosh and their 5 children (now 7), in a story that highlights the importance of mentoring in the industry to support conventional farmers in making the transition to organic.

'Border Park' is located in a tightly held area of predominantly conventional broadacre farm properties in South Australia's Northern Mallee district. As conventional crop farmers, the Schwarz's transitioned into organic management in the early 90's as a result of John's continued health issues due to chemical exposure and the farm property has been certified organic with NASAA since 1996.

Entering retirement age and with no obvious family successor, the couple were hoping to find purchasers with a shared vision and passion for maintaining the property as a certified organic operation.

The Schwarz family first met Josh and Peri McIntosh at an extended family event in what both couples describe as a direct answer to prayer. Both qualified professionals who had grown up on conventional farms in North Western NSW, the McIntosh's were themselves seeking a new direction and had been trialing organic principles on their small acreage near Bathurst.

With a growing family and an interest in understanding where their food came from, both were keen to return to the land. However, commercial scale farming is costly and the couple were not yet ready to take on the level of investment required.

A UNIQUE, WORKING RELATIONSHIP

In a unique agreement, the two families entered an innovative share-farming arrangement, formally documented with the assistance of SA's Rural Solutions, with the aim to transition the farm through lease to purchase with an effective mentoring period.

This has ensured a smooth transition and continuity of organic certification of the farm. The arrangement also enabled the McIntosh's to complete their pre-certification period during the shared management phase of the agreement.

"We are tremendously grateful for the assistance of Simon Vogt, Agribusiness consultant at Rural Solutions," says Peri.

"Although ours was an unusual succession situation and often difficult to articulate, Simon was able to capture the spirit of our agreement accurately and succinctly," she says.

"We recommend his services highly."

Five years into the agreement, John and Jenny still have a hand in the management of the farm through providing advice and counsel at meetings held bi-annually, although all production decision-making ultimately rests with Josh and Peri.

According to Josh, the mentoring period was like an apprenticeship with as much to learn in the purpose and intent of the methods, as there was in the methods themselves.

"We were share farming and employees of the Schwarz's and we didn't have the burden of whole farm management and strategic planning," he says.

"The mentoring gave us the opportunity to gain a general understanding of the Schwarz's farming system, and to bounce our own ideas off John's experience and long term familiarity with the region."

"It was also an important time for building a working relationship."



TOWARD A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

The couple have continued to crop about 800 hectares and run a 350-ewe self-replacing Merino flock and 40-breeder primarily Poll Hereford herd.

The farm's main enterprise is cereal cropping, supplying Laucke Flour Mills with organic wheat and rye, which is milled to make organic bread-making flour.

Cleaned seed is also sold to home millers, other organic cereal farmers and organic/biodynamic orchards and vineyards for cover and green manure crops.

Sheep and cattle have always been run on the property as a complimentary addition to the cropping, however, have traditionally mostly been sold through conventional channels.

Since 2013, the McIntosh's have put significant effort into developing the farm's organic meat sales through the Border Park Organics brand.. Beef and sheep meat is currently delivered direct to customers at more than 100 collection points across SA, Vic, NSW and the NT – and supplied to some organic wholesalers. Almost all meat business is now from repeat customers and through word of mouth.

While there has been some interest in the operations of the farm from conventional farmers, Peri believes that today's pressures on agricultural production means that some farmers are 'stuck'.

"I think many people realise that they need to change, but feel trapped in the (conventional) system," says Peri.

"Hopefully, with growing awareness of the health and environmental benefits of organic, and exponential growth in demand for organic product, we will see significant change over the next 20-30 years."

Josh adds that he doesn't believe that "the inherent risks and challenges that come with organic farming are any more unmanageable than those of conventional farming."

What is fundamentally required is a change of mindset, he says, "a change of farming principles, not just practices."

The example of Border Park provides a new model for successful farm transitioning, ensuring continuity of operation and knowledge transfer of organic farming principles.

"The friendship between our families is foundational - something we have learned to protect," says Josh.

"We always wanted the formal agreement to reflect and support the relationship. It has proven important that we maintain openness, honesty, and that we have the other's best interest at heart," he says.

"Although some of our recent initiatives like online meat marketing and liquid delivery of biological farming inputs are, in some ways, beyond the realm of the Schwarz's operation," he continues, "the ongoing benefit of having John and Jenny's experience and advice is invaluable"

"We still have much to learn."