

Working together for a sustainable future

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With large-scale corporate farms gaining momentum, is the future of the family farm at risk? In the International Year of Family Farming, collaborative farming is emerging as a model that may help keep agriculture's traditional way of life and work intact.

In 2008, John Gladigau and Robin Schaefer sat down with a blank sheet of paper to create the most efficient and profitable farm in SA's northern Mallee.

Their brainstorming session was the result of more than three years of research into collaborative farming, which took John as a Nuffield scholar on travels from Canada, the US, Mexico and Brazil to the UK, Europe and New Zealand.

In search of a model that would translate seamlessly to his backyard, John returned empty-handed, but with a catalogue of fundamental principles that would eventually shape Bulla Burra, John and Robin's unique collaborative venture.

"After five months of travelling I learnt that when it comes to collaborative models, there is no model and there are no rules," said John. "In every situation where there was a highly successful collaborative farm it had been developed specifically for the individual situation, for their own area, for their own businesses, for their own personalities."

With this in mind, John and Robin, both



THE BULLA BURRA TEAM – WORKMAN ANDREW BIELE, ROBIN SCHAEFER AND JOHN GLADIGAU – IN A HEALTHY CROP OF MALLEE CANOLA.

2,000-ha property owners, started designing an ideal family farm for their district, with the focus on increased

professionalism and improved efficiencies. They wanted to retain the integrity and heritage of their family farms yet work together to create a more profitable and sustainable enterprise for the future. "I guess I've always believed that farming needs to become more efficient, that we're over capitalised with machinery but under-resourced and we need to operate in a far more professional manner," said John.

At the core of their model is a cell of optimum efficiency; a concept that matches a specific area of land with a set of machinery, labour and infrastructure. "For us, it's 4,000ha," said John. "We thought we could crop 4,000ha with a 12-metre seeder and harvester, a 300-horsepower tractor, a 36-metre boom spray, a chaser bin, mother bin, three labour units and two utes. And in order to build the business, we'd need to replicate that."

The partners sourced an additional 4,000ha of land through leasing and share farming and learnt the hard way when they accidentally tampered with the



THE BULLA BURRA OPERATION IS BUILT AROUND 4,000 HA 'CELLS OF OPTIMUM EFFICIENCY' THAT CAN EACH BE SOWN WITH A 12-METRE SEEDER, 300-HORSEPOWER TRACTOR AND 36-METRE BOOM SPRAY.

formula. “A couple of years ago, we pushed it out to 9,000ha and we lost efficiency, especially in management and timeliness, which cost us significantly,” said John.

Bulla Burra is a separate company that leases land from the Gladigau and Schaefer families, providing the landowners with an income through flexi-lease payments. The business yields four distinct income streams, with the families receiving a dividend stream from Bulla Burra profits plus a management salary and labour wage for John and Robin. This set up allows flexibility in the way the families and any individuals are involved into the future. While John and Robin are currently involved across the board, they could choose to be just landowners or even a shareholder or business manager. “We believe it’s the means to bring young people into agriculture because they don’t have to buy the full-blown farm,” said John. “They potentially could contribute a little bit of capital and build equity over time.”

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If there’s a silver bullet in successful collaborative farming, John believes it’s involving independent people in the business. Bulla Burra operates with a board headed by independent chairman Jeff MacDonald, who is responsible for overseeing decision-making and keeping

all parties accountable. “He ensures that our families’ emotional attachment to our land and our farms is always kept in check, as well as valued, and that we maintain a high level of professionalism in everything we do,” said John. During his Nuffield travels overseas, emotion was repeatedly identified as the greatest threat to collaborative farming, he said. “It’s the number one reason why collaborative farms fail.”

John and Robin do not attempt to be ‘master of everything’ in the business. As part of the design phase, they allocated roles for themselves that best fit their skills sets, interests and abilities and add the most value to the business. As an innately practical farmer and agronomist, Robin is in charge of operations, while John’s business mind is suited to managing the finances, contracts and strategy aspects. They call on specialist service providers to fill gaps in their expertise and work hard to build relationships, both inside and outside the business. “It’s about giving, in order to get a bit back,” said John.

“Relationship building is one of the keys to the growth of our business. With everyone we deal with, it’s about building a relationship so that it’s positive for both sides. I can’t emphasise that enough.”

Six years into their collaborative venture, John is buoyed by their achievements but quick to counter perceptions that it’s all smooth sailing. “I certainly don’t want to suggest that it’s an easy road,” he said. “There is a great deal of emotion and

independence caught up in family farm ownership and it’s a very hard thing for people to get their heads around.”

A move to fully-fledged no-till practices and acquisition of state-of-the-art technology are just a couple of the positive offshoots of the partnership.

“There is no way Robin and I would have been able to access the technology that we’re now utilising if we hadn’t set up Bulla Burra. We always strove to move down the no-till line, but developing the capacity to do that as a small family farm is extremely difficult. Now we have access to the latest technology; we’re doing variable rate sowing and yield and EM mapping.

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“All of our machinery is under three years old, yet our machinery cost per cropped hectare is less than what it was when we used our own machinery that was six to eight years old.”

Bulla Burra’s machinery is also well-matched to the farm’s requirements, ensuring that the business does not over-capitalise. “One of the biggest drawbacks to the growth of agriculture globally is that we’re so overcapitalised with machinery,” said John. “I once read that there were six times more combine harvesters in the US than were needed to take the entire crop off in a four week period.

“We believe we operate our machinery efficiently, often pushing it to the hilt. We don’t use the biggest machinery because we want it to be versatile. Our tractors go from the seeders to the spreaders and then to the chaser bins, so they hardly ever stop all year round.”

At the heart of many farm businesses is a connection to the land that is nurtured over generations. John believes this remains intact with collaborative farming. “At the end of the day, it’s still our farm and it’s still our kids’ farm. We celebrate that. We just like to think that we’ve brought in some corporate principles to help make it more profitable and sustainable for the future.”



OPERATING EFFICIENCY IS A HIGH PRIORITY ON BULLA BURRA, WITH MACHINERY CLOSELY MATCHED TO THE FARM’S REQUIREMENTS AND OFTEN PUSHED TO THE HILT, PARTICULARLY AT HARVEST TIME.