

SANTFA board offers opportunities for input and learning, says retiring director

GRAEME JENNINGS



RETIRING BOARD MEMBER NICK CORRELL SAW A LOT OF GROWTH AND CHANGE IN NO-TILL FARMING IN HIS SIX YEARS AS A SANTFA DIRECTOR AND GAINED MANY SKILLS AND ABILITIES INCLUDING HOW TO MANAGE AND MOTIVATE PEOPLE; SKILLS HE IS NOW USING IN HIS OWN BUSINESS.

Nick Correll is confident he has gained much more from his six years as a SANTFA board member than he has been expected to give.

Nick, who farms on upper Yorke Peninsula with wife Cynthia and children Henry 8, Annabel 7 and Tilly 5, was inducted as a SANTFA director in June 2008, after joining the organisation in 2002. He decided not to stand for re-election at this year's AGM.

"There was a real hunger in the farming community for good information about no-till farming and SANTFA was at the cutting edge of no-till farming systems and technology."

Like many other farmers, Nick was attracted to SANTFA by its focus on no-till and its practical, problem-solving research that was providing answers to growers' 'how to' questions about no-till farming systems.

"When I joined SANTFA there was a

no-till revolution underway. Growers everywhere were looking for information about no-till farming and SANTFA was the leading organisation in the field."

Six years later he joined the board, taking over from Nigel Williamson as the Yorke Peninsula director.

The SANTFA board is structured so each region of the State is represented around the board table. Nick's decision not to seek re-election this year means the Yorke Peninsula is currently not represented. The South East is also without representation by a board member at present.

"The regional structure of the board is designed to ensure direct coverage of all the State's farming regions and that the organisation is kept in touch with local as well as more general farming issues," he said.

"This is the key to the success of SANTFA because it ensures local issues are identified and keeps the organisation

aware of what is happening in farming districts across the State. Only then can the board determine whether or not there is an issue in a particular regional area that requires research.

"Directors report formally on what is happening in their backyard but the less structured input of directors during board discussions is at least as important because board members' opinions are formed and coloured by their personal insights and experiences."

There are usually four SANTFA board meetings a year; each scheduled for one or two days depending on the issues on the agenda, he said.

In addition to attending board meetings directors also get involved in helping organise the annual regional Crop Walk event in their local area and in planning and presentation of the annual conference. Involvement in the conference ranges from helping develop topic ideas and identify speakers to helping with

organisation of the event and introducing and thanking speakers.

Nick rates the conference and the AGM and related events as personal highlights of SANTFA's annual calendar.

"The conference is always good value for any member, but as a director you get an opportunity to host and interact with speakers ranging from internationally renowned scientists to leading overseas and Australian growers. Being able to interact one-on-one with these presenters is a wonderful experience and opportunity to learn and to develop valuable personal and professional relationships that often become friendships."

Becoming a SANTFA director provides an opportunity to contribute to the farming community while learning new skills and developing personal capacities and capabilities, he said.

"The board has a very practical, applied focus so directors learn progressively from experiences as they continue in the role. You get a lot from involvement at this level, learning about governance, meeting and administration procedures and staff management; not only the legalities and regulations but the problems inherent in personnel management and how to manage and motivate people to get the most from them. I'm finding the staff management experience gained from my involvement on the board particularly valuable since we began employing people."

The board is also a supportive environment that encourages personal growth in aspects such as public speaking and running

meetings, Nick said.

"I've seen it repeatedly in the past six years. A new director starts out feeling quite uncomfortable in these areas, but with the encouragement and support of other directors and opportunities to exercise their skills in non-threatening environments like board meetings and even annual conferences, become familiar and comfortable with such roles and highly capable in them."

Some people fear that becoming a SANTFA director will expose them to scrutiny and criticism, he said, but he has seen little evidence of that.

The vitality and approach of the SANTFA board makes it the envy of a lot of other farming organisations.

"In my experience directors are able to get on with their lives in the usual way.

"Being a board member is just an extension of the grower's role in the community.

"Most board members seem to be people who are good at what they do and other growers often turn to them for information on anything from machinery to new crops, but in my experience being a board member doesn't change the number of enquiries from neighbours and other growers.

"Being a director is nowhere near as daunting or as time-consuming as many people fear and certainly doesn't require as big a time commitment as I thought when I agreed to join the board. And if you have to miss a meeting due to a farming or family issue it's not the end of the world, though it's a good idea to try not to miss two in a row."

A board member needs to be reliable and committed and aware of current farming and environmental issues, Nick said, but otherwise requires no special attributes.

"Sitting around the board table you soon come to understand the challenges SANTFA faces as an industry organisation and learn about governance, administration and so on, as the issues are discussed.

"It's probably an asset to be passionate about no-till farming but there is no requirement to be at the cutting edge.

"Most directors agree to sit around the board table because they can see the value of the organisation and what it does and offers.

"Board members are also often growers who enjoy learning more about farming systems and technologies and are aware of the importance of research, which is the basis for progress," he said. "We need research to solve problems and to identify ways to improve, be more efficient, more sustainable and improve productivity."

SANTFA's research agenda was a major reason for Nick's initial interest in a board position. So too was the characteristic and make-up of the board.

"I was attracted by the dynamism of the board and the people on it. They were good at what they did and ensured the work and operation of SANTFA was meeting the needs of the organisation and its members.

"As a member I found the Board to be a young, dynamic, energetic and enthusiastic group that was a pleasure to work with and be part of. In fact, the vitality and approach of the SANTFA board makes it the envy of a lot of other farming organisations.

"And the directors are hands-on growers, so they are aware and knowledgeable, which means members can be confident the board, and the organisation, remains focused on the needs and interests of growers while taking account of wider



Build a flexible GrainPlan this season

At AWB, we can help you turn your wheat marketing program into a diversified 'GrainPlan', drawing on our Managed Programs to manage risk and add value all year round.

Find out more at grainplan.com.au or call David Evans on (08) 8408 8400

The Early Commitment Program (ECP) is an initiative of AWB Harvest Finance Pools Pty Ltd ATF AWB Pools Trust ABN 33 863 103 287. Terms and Conditions, Fees and Charges apply. Visit awb.com.au for details. TPW0023



environmental and industry-wide issues.”

Research remains a high priority for SANTFA, though Nick has noticed a change in the type of research being done.

“When I joined SANTFA the research was focused on basic no-till issues and identifying the most workable systems and methods. Many of the trials were designed to answer questions raised by members and solve problems they were encountering in their transition to no-till systems.

“Research remains a priority for the board, but with many of the basic no-till issues resolved through formal trial work and member experience, current research tends to be less about basic no-till and more about long-term sustainability and wider issues with implications beyond no-till,” he said.

“With most farmers using no-till methods and systems the research focus is now more on how to manage no-till farming systems in the long-term and ensure sustainability.

“Stubble management to maximise moisture retention and still allow accurate, efficient sowing, remains a significant issue, but a lot of current SANTFA research goes wider and deeper than in the past to issues like herbicide resistance and the biology under-pinning weed management options rather than whether or not no-till works and how to manage a no-till system.

“There is also an increasing focus on innovation.

“Being involved with the Aqua-Till and Aqua-Slash projects exploring the potential of using Ultra-High-Pressure (UHP) water-jet cutters as ‘liquid coulters’ for seeding and as ‘slashers’ for inter-row weeding clearly fall into this category was one of my highlights as a board member.”

Other recent SANTFA research that falls into the ‘innovation’ category includes the work on application of moisture probes in dryland farming; a technology Nick has adopted and is using on his property and feels will prove far more valuable than many recognise at this stage.

Biochar and carbon farming are also high on the list.

“These are complex topics and SANTFA

research, co-ordinated by Research and Development manager Greg Butler, is making significant contributions to our understanding of biochar, in particular, its value in dryland farming systems and how to get the best from it in commercial farming situations.

“SANTFA’s biochar and carbon research is up with the best in Australia, with Greg recognised nationally as one of the leaders in this field in Australia.”


Nick also sees significant potential in the research into agents such as caffeine to

help control snail and slug control, though there remain some significant practical issues to be resolved.


The change in research focus has been reflected in the presentations at SANTFA’s annual conferences, he said.


“Our early conferences had a strong focus on how to get no-till systems to work better, but like our research, conference programs have matured and changed, with many speakers addressing issues beyond basic ‘how to’ no-till questions.”





IT'S ALMOST TOO EASY...





Precision doesn't have to be a tough puzzle. Whether you need guidance, autosteering, planter control, application control, crop sensing, landforming, data management ... Topcon drives farm profitability through technology made easy.

Learn about Topcon solutions and find your Topcon dealer at: www.topconpa.com.

Call toll free: 1 800 1 TOPCON