

Executives seek biological links

By Rachel Bowman

It's a boardroom line up with a difference — successful farmers who make a regular commitment to throw open their books and swap advice, comments and encouragement in a unique mentoring scheme called ExecutiveLink.

It's unusual in an industry that has historically had neighbours looking over the fence in a playful guessing game, but a growing number of rural innovators are choosing to openly exchange information in a mutually beneficial alliance facilitated by leading rural trainers Resource Consulting Services (RCS).

Among them is Kim Packer, general manager (farming operations) of Menindee, South Australia-based Tandou Limited.

Publicly listed Tandou is a diversified agricultural enterprise with 16,000 hectares of irrigated broadacre crops including cotton, durum wheat and malting barley cultivated in an extinct lake bed of high pH, high exchangeable sodium clay soil. Other divisions in Tandou include the horticultural section that grows apples, stonefruit and chardonnay wine grapes; and the South Australian-based vineyard and wine processing businesses.

Kim calls his involvement with national consulting firm RCS a “life changing experience” and says it is now part of his cultural approach to farming and management.

UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY

“To sit there with a group of extremely successful people is an honour and to have them give advice, comment on some of the things we do and take an interest in what we're doing as a way of solving some of their challenges is a unique opportunity,” Kim says.

“I can't speak highly enough of the whole process. It's empowering and the single most rewarding professional activity I've been involved in. Having the RCS staff and their guest speakers mentor us through the issues is a great experience.”

Kim and a colleague completed Bio-Business Farming (BBF) school two years ago and have since implemented ideas including a largescale cotton trash composting system on the Tandou holding. About 3000–5000 tonnes of trash are composted each year and put back out onto the fields as a moisture saving and

soil health initiative. Replicated trials and evaluations ensure scientific rigour is upheld.

“As a public company we feel a great responsibility to the shareholders not to just jump into things but as a company we have an interest in biological agriculture and we're always investigating ways to integrate it into our system,” Kim said.

“The whole organisation, including managing director Bob Smith, is of the

mindset that if we can farm biologically and profitably it has to be of benefit to the soil, the environment, people who work here, the shareholders and all involved.

“It is a holistic approach in that you rely on more than one thing to make your business work. It's a combination of economics, soil health, the welfare of the people — the whole gamut comes together to be an effective business.”

38 ▷

Kim says encouraging others including financial and administrative staff to attend the BBF school allows for an evolution to take place within the company. He says there is a greater degree of ownership and acceptance when people experience new philosophies first hand.

“Chemical agriculture has not held us in good stead. It’s had a very brief reign and we have lost the understanding of biological processes. We’ve forgotten about soil health, plant health and if we can establish a healthy soil we can overcome a lot of our problems.”

RCS director David Hanlon says BBF offers farmers a new way of looking at farming and their ability to improve profit.

“Clients new to RCS often find the workshops very confronting because they are asked to look at where dollars are

made and lost within their businesses,” David says.

“But many clients tell us these workshops have meant the difference between staying on the land and leaving due to financial pressure.

“By the end of the week the participants are weary but excited about the changes they can make that will lead to increased profits and production that looks after the long-term health of their land.

“It develops knowledge in soil management, carbon and nitrogen cycles, economics, accounting, business analysis, finance, communication, family issues, goal setting, planning, ecology, time management and personnel management.”

RCS is running BBF schools across eastern Australia next year, including: Townsville, Toowoomba, and Dubbo. For more information contact David Hanlon on freecall 1800 190011 or 0411 601 949.



Tandou's Kim Packer and Bob Smith have a keen interest in biological agriculture.