

Retaining staff in tough times: A grower's perspective

NEW South Wales grain and cotton grower Gus O'Brien has a straightforward philosophy when it comes to successful staff retention – 'pay well, provide reasonable accommodation and give them some rein'.

From Warren in the state's central west, Gus spoke about the challenges of keeping staff during the current drought as part of a Grains Research and Development Corporation (GRDC) *Dealing with the Dry* forum.

Gus employs two fulltime staff, complemented by five to six casuals during busier times on his 7000 hectare aggregation of owned and leased land, which has a mix of irrigated and dryland farming.

"I work on having two key people – who are very capable and can oversee most parts of the day-to-day operation – but at full capacity we need eight to nine people, so the slack is taken up by backpackers and local contractors," he said.

"When it's dry and finances are tight, I know most of us look closely at our labour costs, but I would recommend doing whatever you can to hold onto your key staff.

"Importantly, involve them in the conversations about your strategy for getting through the drought. Ask for their input. Remind them you value their opinions and you are in this together looking for solutions that will help you all through."

Gus said he had worked hard selecting the right people for his permanent crew and ensuring they had the skills, and or training, to do their job successfully.

"These days I spend 50 per cent of my time in the office, so I have people I can trust doing a lot of the operational work and the key to making that work is stepping back and giving them some rein to do what they do well," he said.

"I try not to stick my head in too much, but we do have weekly meetings.

"My strategy is to employ great people and work to make myself redundant. Of course, it is my business and it will always be my business, so I want to oversee what's going on, but the best way to do that is to have the right people working with you."

Ongoing dry conditions have reduced the area under crop this year at Hatton, and Gus has little need for more than two permanent employees, but he is confident activity will 'ramp up again with rain'.

"I have intentionally structured my workforce so when things are tough, I have the flexibility to unload casual employees, but I am committed to keeping my full timers."

When it comes to securing and retaining permanent staff, he offers this advice to potential employers:

- Pay them well;
- Provide reasonable accommodation;
- Offer them opportunities for further learning and training; and,
- Include and encourage them to have input into business decisions.

Selecting the best 'temporary' staff

Most seasons Gus also employs a temporary team – primarily backpackers – who come via word of mouth or through social media sites, such as Gumtree. These staff tend to stay between three and six months and in Gus' experience finding the best fit for his farming operation has involved:



NSW grain and cotton grower Gus O'Brien understands when it's dry and finances are tough, people start scrutinising labour costs, but he advocates "doing whatever you can" to keep key employees. (PHOTO: GRDC)

- Employing backpackers who are over 21 years of age;
- Ruling out any who rings up and ask how many days they have to work to retain their visa; and,
- Giving preference to applicants with a farming background.

"Regardless of whether you are employing permanent or casual staff, you have to be prepared to 'sell' your business, for example let them know you have quality machinery and good accommodation," Gus said.

"Once they're hired you really need a workplace health and safety induction process. In our operation we have identified vehicles as presenting the most risk, so we have two strict rules – wear a seatbelt and no mobile phones while operating any vehicle."

In summary, Gus said being an employer had its challenges but being the right 'boss' meant you attracted and kept well-trained and committed employees.

"I am always interested in how long people have stayed in positions – not backpackers or casuals because the nature of that arrangement is different – but length of time in a job reflects on both the employer and the employee," he said.

"Being a fair, considered and reasonable boss who trusts his team, works to create an environment where employees are committed, feel valued and will go out of their way to make sure jobs are done well.

"Once you establish that sort of rapport and relationship you want to do everything you can to keep those people working with you, especially in tough times."

For more GRDC resources on *Dealing with the Dry*, go to <https://bit.ly/2WltQhO> or for information on employing people in agriculture go to <https://www.peopleinag.com.au/>

Croplands and Weed-It setting the standard for precision spraying

EFFECTIVE weed detection and elimination is becoming increasingly important in cropping systems around the world with herbicide resistance on the rise, less precipitation and increased environmental awareness. To help growers gain the advantage in weed management and control, Croplands Equipment introduces Weed-It Quadro – the next generation of spot spraying.

The new Weed-It Quadro system incorporates 10 years of worldwide experience and has been extensively tested and calibrated for Australian conditions.

The Quadro sensor offers an updated appearance and blue light source with increased power efficiency. Blue LEDs have proven to be more sensitive to weeds and less sensitive to background noise than the red LED-lighting used to date.

Adding to the increased accuracy and efficiency is the new dual core processor which delivers fast communication and high sampling frequency.

To provide better penetration in stubble and minimise shading of small grasses, Weed-It sensors are placed at one metre intervals across the boom and control four nozzles (individually) on 25 cm spacings. The system can be built onto any type and brand of ground glider and trailed sprayer, quad, orchard sprayer, toolbar, self-propelled sprayer and even autonomous sprayers with working widths up to 36 metres.

Croplands Equipment Portfolio Manager, Steve Norton, has been working closely with Weed-It manufacturers to test and



Weed-It Quadro sensor – the next generation in spot spraying.

calibrate the Quadro sensor with the goal of providing the next level of weed detection.

“Initial testing was undertaken in Australia in January 2018 and since then the Quadro sensor has undergone substantial changes to both the hardware and software,” says Steve.

“In March 2019, a team of three engineers from Rometron in the Netherlands, spent four weeks in Australia conducting extensive field trials in the Mallee region of South Australia and Queensland. These field trials were crucial in validating the functionalities and finer settings of the new sensor to ensure maximum effectiveness in our varied Australian conditions.”

Long history of quality products

Croplands has a long history of manufacturing and importing high-quality spray equipment, working alongside growers in the battle against weeds and continuously striving to develop innovative spray solutions.

Central to this is the sophisticated Weed-It optical spot spray technology. Designed and manufactured in the Netherlands by precision spraying specialists Rometron, Weed-It is the world's best-selling optical spot spraying system.

Using advanced sensors to detect chlorophyll in the leaves of weeds in fallow fields, the Weed-It system triggers a targeted herbicide application. Weed-It is the only technology that calibrates and corrects automatically and ultrafast for different soil and background conditions (dry, wet, shade, night-time).

Croplands has led the charge in bringing Weed-It to market, having sold over 10,000 Weed-It cameras in Australia alone and recently taking on the distribution of the technology in Canada.

Weed-It technology has proven to assist Australian broadacre farmers delay the onset of herbicide resistance, lower their weed seed bank, improve water retention and achieve substantial chemical savings.

“Croplands is committed to the on-going development of Weed-It, we will continue to work with growers to understand the challenges they face so that we can create sustainable solutions for the future,” says Sean Mulvaney, Croplands Equipment General Manager.



New blue light source is more sensitive to weeds and less sensitive to 'background noise'.