

*For Rachel Neumann a participant in one of the Grain & Graze Adaptive Management Groups, one of the clear benefits for her farming family has been the encouragement to focus at working ON the business rather than IN it.*

## Upper SE Farmer Puts Grain & Graze 2 Management Lessons Into Practice

Written for Grain & Graze 2 by  
Mike Roberts Communications, Research and Consulting

David and Rachel farm with David's parents, Frank and Jeanne at Yumali. They have only recently become involved in the financial and management side of the business as generational change occurs. During the transition, the Grain & Graze Adaptive Management program has become a really good learning platform enabling them to move into these roles.



(L to R) David and Rachel Neumann with Felicity Turner

### The program

Many individuals working on the family farm recognize that change is required to survive, prosper and grow the farm business and that change may also be required to provide personal growth. Creating change also brings with it an element of risk taking and uncertainty.

Under the Grain & Graze 2 program, 5 “Adaptive Management groups” were formed across eastern SA. Each group comprises 8-10 farming businesses and professional farm business support personnel who are interested in developing their skills in managing and adapting to change.

The program aims to build the skills of the participants in the following general areas:

- Risk and reward in farm businesses
- Financial literacy
- Understanding people
- Understanding human factors in decision making processes

### Farm Background

Rachel's in-laws, Frank and Jeanne, have built the farm up to a 2000ha mixed enterprise after moving to the district in the 1960s from Yorke Peninsula. Located in the Upper SE, it is in a typical Mallee environment with 375mm annual rainfall and sandy soils with some limestone and non-wetting sand.

Crops such as wheat, barley, canola and lupins cover about 800ha. 1200 Merino ewes for crossbred lamb and wool production and 80 Murray Grey breeders make use of the grazing land.



## Upper SE Farmer Puts Grain & Graze 2 Management Lessons Into Practice

### Graze & Grain 2 opportunity

The local farm supply store first alerted Rachel to the formation of the Grain & Graze 2 group being run by agronomist Felicity Turner. After a phone call to Felicity, Rachel thought there would be some benefits for their business and she and David joined the group.

“Small family farms are becoming a lot more like other small businesses and to survive you have to implement more business type strategies and thinking. One of the key things we keep hearing at the meetings is to spend more time working on rather than in your business.”

Rachel has teaching qualifications and comes from a business family who were financial planners and accountants. When she married into the Neumann family she found herself in a generational farming family where roles were in transition.

Formally joining the partnership only in recent years, David and Rachel have found strategies for running business meetings amongst partners a particularly valuable take home lesson from their adaptive management group. Implementing proper meeting structures helped with decision-making and smoother transition as roles began to change.

Time spent learning about personality types has been particularly helpful to Rachel. Understanding the need to appreciate different peoples' personality types and communication styles has made it easier for David and Rachel to take into consideration the views and feelings of Frank and Jeanne, clearly of an older generation.

Rachel says, “that helps to avoid conflict, make progress and make decisions if people are eased into things or people's personalities are considered when looking at benefits and new strategies. My in-laws are still very much involved in the farm.”

### Job descriptions

One of the things Rachel found most useful was learning about the importance of looking at the part everyone plays in the business through the development of job descriptions. She says that farmers are incredibly skilled in a huge range of physical tasks but sometimes not so skilled in the communication that can make businesses run more smoothly.

“It is one thing to verbalize what you think your role is but another to actually minute it and put it on paper. I think it is a good way to acknowledge everyone's different role and contribution. We implemented that soon after discussing it with the group at a meeting in Adelaide and it has been quite valuable.”

“My lead-in at the start of the meeting was to discuss what we talked about at the conference. So I guess they just saw it as me doing my homework coming back from a conference.”

For the number one item on the quarterly business meeting agenda, each of the four partners described their view of their role. Frank does most of the stock, fencing and routine tractor work. David does more of the chemical and cropping side of the business and also organizes shearing. There is some crossover but also some defined lines as chemical and fertilizer application become increasingly dictated by computers, with which David is more comfortable.

## Upper SE Farmer Puts Grain & Graze 2 Management Lessons Into Practice

For many years Jeanne has done an outstanding job maintaining a manual financial recording system for the farm. However, with the requirements of BAS and computerization of most farm records much of this has fallen to Rachel's computer skills. Jeanne still pays the bills, writes out the cheques and manages the mail while assisting with the care of her grandchildren.

That transition for Jeanne has been difficult at times, as have Rachel's feelings as she acquired daunting new responsibilities. Defining and clarifying these issues in a formal sense at meetings has been very beneficial for everyone.

"I think that having job descriptions, especially with us coming into the partnership and taking more responsibility has been very important for everyone to know that they are still valued and still had definite and defined roles. It helped to put Frank and Jeanne more at ease knowing that they were still expected to contribute in certain ways as opposed to feeling like they were being pushed out."

"It was also important for us as the younger generation coming in to not feel like we were being thrown in the deep end with all the responsibilities from the get go. In our case we have 5 children under the age of 11 so we have a big responsibility and huge time commitment caring for them and managing around them."

"We first proposed job descriptions at our meeting in August last year and we try to have a meeting every quarter. We don't look at it as a one off thing but rather something we review every meeting. I thought it would be a valuable thing to acknowledge everyone's strengths and contribution."

### Has it helped?

It is still a work in progress but Rachel says that having regular family business meetings where things like job descriptions are discussed has opened up communication and instigated some discussions that otherwise might not have taken place.

She sees it as just one step in an increasing number of steps, which they hope will make the partnership more effective. From her point of view it is a way forward toward change. "Better communication gives everyone a clearer understanding of where we are going, what we are about and how we operate. As part of a five-year plan of development it will make generational change easier."

### Focus on costs you can control

One of the speakers at the Grain & Graze Adaptive Management conference that really struck a chord with Rachel was Mark Gardner. He is a consultant based in Dubbo and his company, Vanguard Business Services, helps over 320 farm families to improve their landscape, their lifestyle and their profitability.

Rachel knows that there is very little farmers can do to change commodity prices, input costs and, of course, the weather. Mark suggested they just take little steps. Is there a possibility that they could have an impact on 4 major outgoing costs?

"I did come back and looked at what some of our major expenses are. One we are hoping to target is water use. We went to a field day to have a look at water monitors to identify leaks and hopefully reduce our water use." The Neumann's are also looking at better use of autosteer systems that have the potential to make



## Upper SE Farmer Puts Grain & Graze 2 Management Lessons Into Practice

fertilizer and chemical use more efficient.

### Like minded farmers and couples

The opportunity to be part of a group of like-minded farmers and couples trying to improve their business is something Rachel and David see as a huge plus. They have attended most of the sessions together and say they make the most of their travel time home talking about what they just heard. Discussing some of the things they learn in local and Adelaide groups with other couples has been invaluable.

It may be a hackneyed phrase but 'working ON instead of IN the business' has taken on real meaning for the Neumann's. Rachel admits uncertainty about exactly how to go about all the things they need to do but knowing that is what they must focus on brings more clarity. "Because of my experience with Grain & Graze Adaptive Management groups, I'm thinking about looking at opportunities like more study or becoming involved in local farming groups as a way forward."

### For more information:

Rachel Neumann

**Mob:** 0409671495

**Email:** [rjbal@internode.on.net](mailto:rjbal@internode.on.net)

Felicity Turner (coordinator of Upper SE Adaptive Management Group)

**Mob:** 0400 299 087

**Email:** [mf.turner@bigpond.com](mailto:mf.turner@bigpond.com)