

TREES GROW COMMUNITIES



Forestry industry develops skills of local workers



“The plantation timber industry has many positive effects on rural areas”, says Murray Howson.

After Murray Howson graduated from university, he taught Industrial Arts at Albany and Mount Barker high schools. Now he runs one of Western Australia’s largest timber harvesting and haulage companies based on the South Coast of WA.

“I’ve always lived in Albany, except for my time at Uni,” he said.

At the same time as he was teaching, Murray and his wife, Sue, were growing potatoes on some land they had bought. With the potatoes business came some farm machinery including a tractor and truck.

With that start, Sue, Murray and a business partner tendered for a CALM contract to plant 1000ha of *Pinus radiata*. After they won the contract, Murray dropped out of teaching and became a full time plantation contractor.

“I still think teaching is a great profession,” he said. “And I miss the holidays.”

Two years later he moved from pines to blue gums and contracted work from several local companies, including ITC, Bunnings Tree Farms, Yates, Pacific Foods and Timbercorp and even some interstate in SA and Victoria.

“We work entirely with blue gums now.”

“We spent the last 20 years establishing plantations including ripping, spraying, planting and fertilizing. We must have planted 80 – 90 million trees.”

Blue gums thrive in the 650mm and greater rainfall belt around the south and west coasts of WA.

At the peak, Murray was employing up to 100 people in seasonal planting work, but he gave that away in favour of concentrating on harvesting and log carting.

“There is no return on trees unless you cut them down,” he said.

He began harvesting in 2001 with one old harvest machine and one truck. Now he has about 20 full time drivers and machinery operators based at Albany.

His company, Edenborn Pty Ltd, has a contract with Albany Plantation Export Company (APEC) for harvesting and delivering timber to their chipping mill near Albany airport.

“We cart about 100,000 tonnes per year to the mill and another 100,000 tonnes as woodchips to the port for Integrated Tree Cropping (ITC).

“We work all over the southwest, within about 130km of the port. Further than that, cartage is unviable,” he said.

“Plantation timber has a growing future. The industry is still ramping up. It will probably double in size, but not much more than that.”

Murray is concerned that the Federal Government is thinking about tinkering with the tax arrangements that attract people to make the long-term investment in trees.

“There is a future for the industry as long as we are still able to sell Managed Investment Schemes. That will keep the industry moving forward.

“Most timber management companies lease land for a crop and then replant or coppice for a second crop.”

“Income from leasing land has enabled many marginal farmers to cash-up and pay off the bank.

“The vibrant land market also allows people to either retire or move to farms in other areas. Some have stayed in the area but got into other businesses.

“The plantation timber industry has had many positive effects on rural areas.

“Plantations have also had a positive impact on rural areas by giving country people more employment opportunities.

“It is particularly positive for the operators, who are highly skilled as there are many opportunities.”

Training is an ongoing issue for the industry, because, like all new industries, it had to develop its own skills base.

“We train in house, although a training school has recently started up in Albany.

“Not all the necessary skills are readily available, but things are starting to level out. Albany now has a good supply of skilled, trained people.”

The hinterland close to WA’s south coast is too wet for grain cropping, but it grows good pastures, grapevines and trees.

Blue gums have provided a steady reliable income stream and provided welcome stability to farmers who for long had been dependent on the fluctuating fortunes of beef and fat lambs, not to mention the besieged wine industry.

It has also helped the local workforce develop and broaden its skills base.