

TREES GROW COMMUNITIES



Blue Gums Support the Family Farm



“The timber industry is a good place to work” says Jon Oldfield.

Federal Government tax arrangements that provide valuable funds for the plantation forest industry are under threat and that’s bad news for country people in WA’s Great Southern, says plantation contractor Jon Oldfield.

Most farms in the high rainfall country between Albany and the Stirling Range are too small to support modern large-scale farm enterprises. As the sheep industry fell into the doldrums and beef suffered periodic ups and downs, farmers have begun to look for alternative employment.

One of these individuals was Jon Oldfield, who was forced to take up shearing to support the family farm when he left school, while Jon’s wife Deb looks after the fat lambs on their 290ha property.

“I went shearing to keep the family farm going. It is too small to be viable on its own.

“If it hadn’t been for shearing and the timber industry, we would have sold out long ago and gone to Perth,” he said.

Instead, Jon and Deb live in a comfortable modern house in Albany with magnificent views across the Princess Royal Harbour and Southern Ocean towards Antarctica.

After 18 years of shearing, he turned to establishing and maintaining blue gum plantations. He now employs about 30 full time workers as well as up to six casuals.

Jon runs Rural Project Services based on Mount Barker and Manjimup. His company contracts mainly to Great Southern Plantations (GSP).

The work consists of ripping, planting, thinning, fertilising, chemical application and road construction.

It all started in 1995 when a friend, who was a plantation project manager, suggested that Jon and Deb undertake a tree-planting contract.

Jon's business, which no longer undertakes planting, looks after blue gum plantations in the vast area bounded by Bremer Bay, Karridale and Boyup Brook, although he also recently sent two of his employees to a project on the Tiwi Islands.

In addition to blue gums, Jon has also worked on *Casuarina obesa* and salt tolerant eucalyptus plantations.

"We are the major employer at Mt Barker," he said. "In such a rural area, training can be a problem."

He trains staff in chemical application, chain saw handling and driving 4WD vehicles and plans to work out a curriculum with the local TAFE.

Sometimes, after training, his employees go off to work elsewhere. So Jon ends up training his competitors' staff.

"It is something you have to live with, sometimes they come back again," he said philosophically.

Mount Barker has little local industry other than beef, sheep and wine grapes, so recruitment is not a problem.

"They just walk in the door. The job involves a fair bit of travelling. Sometimes they spend up to two months at a time camping away from home, just coming back at weekends."

Such work doesn't attract many women, but Jon does employ one female truck driver and provided seasonal work for many rural women when tree planting.

Jon is concerned that the Federal Government is reviewing the tax arrangements that attract investment into the industry.

"Blue gums have replaced some other rural industries, but the plantation industry provides more full time employment and is not as seasonal as farming.

“We were controversial and copped a lot of flak when we first started. But now the industry is generally accepted.

“Plantation forestry is no longer a closed community. It has changed like all things that grow.”

He said the plantation forestry has been good for him.

“We’ve been lucky. We built up a good relationship with Great Southern Plantations. It has worked well for both of us.

“It is hard work. When you aren’t doing it, you wish you were and when you are doing it, you wish you weren’t.”

Jon has several ex-shearers working for him.

“I miss the humour of the shearing shed,” he said.

What of the future?

“We could go into harvesting, my partner has experience in that area.”

Jon is on the local organising committee of Timber Communities Australia Albany branch, which was set up to speak for the families and communities that rely on the timber industry in Western Australia.

“We promote the industry by giving employment and treating people well. The timber industry is seen as a good place to work.

“It is secure and we are getting good people in.”

Plantation forestry is also providing a welcome alternative to agriculture and is helping to build up a skilled workforce in rural communities.