

A fresh perspective

26 July 2018

Lessons learned:

- Knowledge, support and networks outside the business are invaluable.
- It can be hard to see possibilities from within the business, especially during tough seasons, so be prepared to step off the property to seek support and information.
- Confidence in financial processes and business systems is important to move forward.
- Succession is ongoing and takes years. You can rely on others, as long as they are 'right' for you. Take a step-by-step approach on the way to the end goal.



Drought, a change in enterprise and engaging the next generation prompted Cunnamulla sheep producer Kym Thomas to look for support and tools to drive her enterprise forward.

Kym runs commercial and stud Australian White flocks comprising 8,000 ewes with her son Tony Reid and husband Greg Dunsdon.

Their home property, Kahmoo, has been in her family since 1911 and has weathered many changes. Kahmoo is located at Cunnamulla and, more recently, a property for finishing sheep has been purchased at Inverell.

In 2001, the family moved away from their traditional Shorthorn and Merino enterprises, selecting trade cattle and meat sheep for flexibility in the face of climate variability.

The ongoing dry is reflected in stocking rates – the family once ran 23,000 Merinos. However, after several severe drought years, the flock is back to 3,500 ewes plus lambs (from the general 8,000 ewes).

Declining rainfall has been compounded by a surge in kangaroos and wild dogs. In 2013, Kym estimated there were 30,000 kangaroos, compared to 6,000 ewes. Fencing (10-strand plain wire electric fences powered by solar and mains electricity) and mitigation permits have been effective.

Another challenge has been the learning curve of managing and marketing meat sheep.

The family achieved organic certification to tap into premium markets and to support direct marketing, collaborating with neighbours to coordinate logistics and create consistent supply to customers.

Kym completed the business transition with her parents, Anne and Geoff Thomas, a decade ago.

She was mindful of establishing a succession plan when Tony returned to Kahmoo, after leaving school and working on NT cattle stations and a NSW sheep stud to gain a wider perspective.

“Drought and changing markets have highlighted risk in our business, so I was really looking at where Tony and I wanted the business to head,” Kym said.

“I knew I needed support and a network, when I heard about the Agri-Business Development Institute (ABDI) business-mentoring program it ticked all the boxes.”

Kym and Tony finished the 12-month program, which was developed and supported with funding from MLA Donor Company, with a clear direction and shared long-term goals.

“The program gave Tony confidence in where he can take the business, and me the confidence to let him have a go,” Kym said.

“We were both able to acknowledge our expectations and have clarity in our shared vision.”

This vision is to run a profitable multi-generational business, to find opportunities to supply lambs into high-end market and to explore export potential.

“The program emphasised that our goal has to be to put money into our grass and view the property as a business, not a lifestyle – yes, Kahmoo is our home but we can’t let emotions control the business.”

Making change

Kym and Tony have taken steps to drought-proof the business by purchasing a property at Inverell, NSW, to finish lambs and maintain their stud rams, enabling control of supply and consistent turn-off.

They also identified their specific roles in the business and any skills gaps, and now outsource many functions, including marketing and auditing.

“Tony and I both prefer to be outside, but I recognised that what happens in the office is integral to the success of our business,” Kym said.

“Tony now manages the operations and, while I support him in that, my main role now is expanding the business, with him involved every step of the way.”

Kym said she came away from the program excited about the possibilities.

“Mindset is so important, especially during drought. It was terrific to get off the property and meet people with similar mindsets; this network has been so valuable.

“The program has been a worthwhile investment for us – we have far greater confidence to progress the business with a well thought-out, long-term growth plan.”

Kym and Tony are focusing on improving their marketing and product branding, and will soon trial their lamb with selected restaurants and high-end city butchers.

This work is being done through the MLA Donor Company Producer Innovation Fast-Track project.

More information

- [Email Kym Thomas](#)
- Agri-Business Development Institute: abdi.com.au
- MLA Donor Company: mla.com.au/mdc

ABDI programs:

- Free webinars on business management and business growth issues facing the agribusiness owner
- 12-week intensive courses to provide the fundamentals of an effective business
- 12-month business mentoring programs, including a strong focus on beef, sheep and broadacre businesses. Business mentors work with participants to keep them accountable over the 12 months, as they make planned changes in their business.

Upcoming events:

ABDI 12 Week Fast Track Agri-Business By Design Program

- 23-24 August 2018 - Dalby, QLD
- 6-7 September 2018 - Armidale, NSW

ABDI 12-month Agri-Business Management Program (MDC-supported):

- 20–21 September 2018 – Wagga Wagga, NSW