

SPECIAL EDITION: COVID-19

A special letter from the Managing Director

The purpose of this special COVID-19 edition of InTouch is to let you know how Rural Directions is going to operate moving forward. We also want to provide some practical tips about how to manage a farm business at this unprecedented time. My motto this week has been “innovation never comes from comfort zones...”

- Rural Directions has now equipped all team members to work from home. With our normal travel, all consultants are mobile, so relocating to effectively operate from home has been relatively straight forward. All the team have remote access to our computer system. This setup has always been a pillar of our business continuity plan. I had hoped we would never have to implement it...
- A few years ago, we invested in video conferencing technology. This was to enhance communication between offices and to provide services to remote clients. This technology means we will be able to continue service delivery without the need to meet face to face. I have had many advisory board and coaching sessions over the last week using video conferencing and client reaction has been very positive. One client said, “that worked really well..., we actually do not need to meet face to face ever again...”
- I think the use of video conferencing with clients will enhance service delivery as we move forward. We will also work with you to help make the transition. I had some apprehensive clients recently, but we got there, and everyone had a good experience. Basically, if you have a computer with a video cam or an iPad, we will be fine.

- The pre-seeding grain marketing briefings have also been delivered via video conference. The grain marketing team are now looking to run specific technical sessions via video conferencing very soon. We will also be using video conferencing for the delivery of some workshops.
- On farm visits for agronomy will be possible as we move forward, but the personal distancing principle will obviously be followed. There may be opportunities to use technology like FaceTime to do paddock inspections. We are already using the NDVI capability in AgWorld to focus on potential paddock hot spots.
- On our farm we have significant key person risk. The task over the last week has been to create a series of videos that shows Chris and I what to do in the event we are a man down. This job has been on the ‘to do’ list for a long time. We have steadily been building up the list, but this week our farm operations manager has been compiling ‘how to’ videos at a rapid rate. These videos are not Hollywood productions, but they can be extremely useful to show us simple things like where the grease nipples are... Yes, they are in the manual, but there is nothing like a short video to short circuit and remove some stress.

Our consultants have been working with clients to help them adapt to the changing COVID-19 world and identify how it will impact their business. Please find below some brief and, hopefully, useful tips for your information.

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Rob Purvis, our *Property Management* consultant, stresses the need for simple planning systems to keep things on track in the event that you are out of action. These include:

- Have documented farm maps with paddock names, watering points and pipelines
- Have written livestock feeding plans and proposed grazing rotations
- Keep a register of silos and what is in each one
- Have easy to follow record keeping procedures, so that you know what has gone out in each paddock
- Have clear seeding plans that include order of paddocks
- Simplify everything – this may even include blanket sowing instead of variable rate
- Make a note of who you have been interacting with; if you need to back track, it's easier to do if there is a record

Dee Heinjus, one of our *HR Services* consultants, urges clients to focus on implementing the social distancing practices within their team:

- Make sure expectations are clear for staff, and lead by example
- Use separate tools/equipment or sterilise shared tools/equipment
- Do not use shared spaces
- Regularly clean and disinfect surfaces and equipment
- Regularly wash hands
- Adopt different shifts where possible, to minimise overlap of staff
- Consider and plan for the likelihood of interruptions to your team through the need to isolate, look after children if schools are closed, or illness
- Encourage staff to stay on farm on weekends; all unnecessary travel needs to stop

On the livestock front, *Livestock Services* consultant, Tara Graetz notes the potential disruption to supply chains:

- Prepare for reduced capacity in processing facilities if shutdowns are enforced
- Maintain enough feed reserves to work around any delays in unplanned turnoff times
- Keep in touch with contractors, such as shearing teams and freight operators; as availability may be affected by the need to isolate or illness

For crops and pastures, *Agronomy Services* consultant, Richard Saunders says that flexibility will be key to optimising results this year:

- As availability of various inputs will be tested this year
- Workarounds are possible for many chemical and fertiliser products. If you can't get what you originally planned, stay in touch with your agronomist
- Timing remains the most important input, so make sure that you have what you need on farm to be able to nail the important dates (eg seeding supplies and seeder parts)

Whilst the grain market has been very volatile, *Grain Marketing* consultant, Rebekah Starick suggests keeping a longer-term outlook:

- Develop your own set of grain marketing guidelines that are appropriate for your business, rather than getting caught up in the market noise
- Look for opportunities within the volatility for longer-term pricing with the 21/22 crop
- Pulse markets are likely to be more affected by the virus than cereals, now that the availability of containers is impacting global trade flows

At a whole of business level, *Advisory Boards* will be looking at updating and reviewing risk management tools. Royce Pitchford explains:

- A risk register documents risks that can impact on the business, classifies them for both likelihood and consequence, enabling prioritisation and actions to be identified
- This should be updated in light of some of the new risks emerging from the COVID-19 situation, such as staff availability, logistics and broader economic impacts
- When feeling overwhelmed with the increasing restrictions and constraints, focus on what is within your own control

There are also numerous industry resources being developed that can assist you to manage in the coming months. A couple of useful links are:

- Graingrowers - <https://www.graingrowers.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/GrainGrowers-COVID-19-guide-for-growers.pdf>
- Wool producers - <https://woolproducers.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Shearing-Operations-Protocols-in-response-to-COVID19-FINAL.pdf>

If you have any questions or want to work through a management challenge, please reach out. Whilst our team are all working from home, they are still accessible and client focused.

I hope this special edition provides some value. Most importantly, please be assured, we are able to support all clients as we move forward.

Please stay safe.

David Heinjus