

Facing the challenges head on: National president of the Cattle Council, Andrew Ogilvie, on "Churinga" at Biscuit Flat, SA.



BEEF BOSS

NEW CATTLE COUNCIL PRESIDENT ANDREW OGILVIE IS NEGOTIATING A COMPLEX PATH FROM THE FAMILY FARM TO CORPORATE MARKETS.

STORY GRETEL SNEATH PHOTOS JOANNA FINCHAM

THERE IS A WORD that's buzzing in Andrew Ogilvie's ears. Sustainability. And the sound is even louder after travelling to the United States for the 2012 McDonald's Worldwide Convention.

"I reckon I heard the word 'sustainable' used in every single speech of anyone who was associated with the supply chain," the new national president of Australia's Cattle Council says. "It's the big issue that we are going to have to come to grips with, a complete mind-shift, and a major shift in corporate priorities."

To call sustainability a buzzword is almost too flippant; it's more of an industry benchmark that's being fired with gusto from all directions. "McDonald's, Coles, Woolworths, the RSPCA and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) – they're all focusing on the sustainability of supply, and also the animal-welfare and environmental implications," he says.

Most cattle producers would argue that they have been striving to achieve sustainability all along, and perhaps already have. "From a farmer's point of view, if you can hand your farm to the next generation in as good or better condition than when you started farming, then you would think that your practices would be classed as sustainable," Andrew says. "If every generation achieves that, you have a sustainable farming business. That's how simple it is."

Demonstrating this to corporate audiences could easily be a full-time job. But it isn't. Andrew is also part of the family team that runs the large grazing enterprise "Spotshill" on more than 10,000 hectares in the South East of South Australia and Victoria's Western District. He and wife Deborah live on "Churinga", the original patch of dirt purchased by Andrew's father, Doug, in 1949. Lured by reports of more than 600 millimetres of rainfall annually, cheap land and the prospect of good drainage, Doug shifted from Booborowie in South Australia's Mid North and settled at Biscuit Flat, an area named after the biscuit-like rounds of limestone that dotted the landscape.

"Dad bought 1200 acres [485ha] and it was only a

couple of pounds an acre, and then a piece of scrub next door for two shillings and sixpence an acre," Andrew says. "The locals said, 'You'll never get your money back', but he said he would be happy if he was able to cut 100 quid's worth of posts out of it."

Once it was cleared and the fences were built, it turned out to be good grazing land – "Good limestone country is always good for raising stock" – and today, the family business also supports Andrew's son, James, along with two of Andrew's brothers, Noel and Richard, and three nephews.

"We have had opportunities to do other things, but we just love farming, and this is good, healthy country," he says. "We've got a very stable and predictable climate, and the area also has a great community feel."

Andrew's eldest daughter, Rebecca, is an army captain, while Danielle is a critical-care nurse in Mount Gambier. Both girls head home to the farm as much as possible. There are about 20 families in the immediate district, but right from his Rural Youth days, Andrew has believed in developing off-farm interests.

"If you're active in your community, you've got a good community, and I've always believed that," he says.

From school councils, to the Biscuit Flat Country Fire Service, his lengthy resumé reveals a man who is happy to work for causes he believes in. Andrew joined the Kingston branch of the South Australian Farmers Federation (SAFF), progressed to the SAFF Livestock Committee and was then nominated for the Cattle Council. After serving as treasurer and vice-president, he has now become the first South Australian to take on the president's role.

"It's not often that the smaller states get an opportunity to lead organisations like this – it's normally made up of people from Queensland and New South Wales, purely because of the way agripolitics works," he says.

Fellow South Australian, Andy Withers, joins him on the council. Andy also worked with Andrew on the South Australian Cattle Advisory Group and the

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SAFF Livestock Committee, and describes him as a genuine and valuable contributor to primary industry. “Andrew is very thoughtful, very thorough, very professional and a fantastic advocate for the industry,” Andy says. “He speaks well, but more than anything, he thinks things through and has an ability to examine both sides of a situation; he doesn’t go off half-cocked.”

It’s a big year for the Cattle Council; the organisation is in the process of being restructured to ensure greater representation, and is also working on a beef-industry strategic plan, which is due for renewal after five years. New research priorities need to be set, and issues such as live export, animal welfare, climate change and environmental management will be addressed.

Animal welfare and live-export issues were heightened by the ABC’s *Four Corners* exposé of the treatment of Australian cattle exported live to Indonesia, which aired in May last year. Andrew says the government decision to close trade was a poor one, with many northern producers still suffering. But he is also at pains to point out that industry and government have

been working together since then to implement the Export Supply Chain Assurance Scheme (ESCAS), designed to underpin the long-term viability of the live-export industry. “As an industry, we’ve been chipping away at this for a long time, but sometimes you need a catalyst to enforce changes and that’s what the *Four Corners* program did – it brought home to industry participants that slow progress was unacceptable; it had to be radical,” he says.

While Andrew is embracing these many challenges, don’t ask him about his brother’s bad knee, the farmhand who broke his arm playing footy, and the 3000 calves ready to be marked. When he recaps his schedule over the past four weeks, he has to pull out his diary. With Adelaide airport three-and-a-half hours away, it’s clear that he is clocking up plenty of country miles. In fact, he has just arrived home from the McDonald’s Convention in Orlando, Florida.

“There were 16,000 delegates in a single auditorium, and, by my calculations, it was around 16 hectares in size – it was vast,” he says. The convention generally targets franchisees and suppliers; it was the first time producers of raw ingredients have been invited to attend. “The delegates were extremely excited about the fact that they had food producers on the conference floor, and it was great to have that recognition that the food chain actually linked back to a farm,” Andrew says.

Sporting his Akubra, Andrew manned a market stall, spruiking the benefits of Aussie beef. “McDonald’s is the single largest customer for Australian beef, and many were surprised that in addition to supplying 100 percent of all Australian and Asian burgers, you’ll find our beef in approximately 15 percent of every American burger,” he says. “Our leaner meat is used to balance the fat content of their feedlot beef.”

McDonald’s has a corporate division dedicated to progressing sustainability in all levels of the supply chain, and Andrew says the company is very serious about the quality, safety and traceability of its food. “I spoke with them at length regarding their expectations,” he says. “They’re aware that they need to work constructively



At work on the farm: Andrew Ogilvie checks a heifer’s eartag to confirm its pedigree as part of his family’s grazing enterprise. OPPOSITE: Andrew Ogilvie works on an International TD9 crawler tractor developing land to be planted to improved pasture in 1980.

with producers at farm level to achieve a system that’s not too complicated, but they’re not really sure how to achieve it.”

Trying to see sustainability through the eyes of these large corporations is one of the major challenges facing the Cattle Council and the industry in general.

Andrew believes a balance is needed between corporate compliance and farm profit. “There’s two ways to go with it – you either regulate yourself to death, which is the European tradition, or you put in simple systems that can be verified without the use of excessive regulation, and we would all like to go down this pathway,” he says. “We don’t want a proliferation of quality-assurance

schemes that create a huge amount of paperwork for farmers.”

It’s not surprising that the industry is setting up a round-table discussion for sustainable beef production, and organisations such as McDonald’s, Coles, Woolworths, the RSPCA and the WWF will be invited to contribute.

“We need to understand expectations in order to achieve good outcomes that everybody can be comfortable with,” Andrew says. “Farmers can do anything. They’re the greatest adapters in the world, but they have to be profitable. We can have one cow to a hectare if that’s what people want, but they have to be prepared to pay for it.”