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*Media release
July 30, 2014*

Goondiwindi gets the goods – leading farmer awarded prestigious management prize

Goondiwindi farmer Charmian Arnott has been awarded the prestigious **Rabobank ‘Dr John Morris’ Business Development Prize**, recognised for her effective business planning tools which have translated into tangible benefits on-farm in a short space of time.

Charm was presented with the esteemed prize – which is awarded annually as part of the **Rabobank Executive Development Program** – for her outstanding management project, which focused on business planning and goal setting in order to gain more control over the general farm operations and management processes and being able to respond more rapidly to change.

Receiving the prize at the at the graduation of the 2013/2014 Executive Development Program, a leading agricultural business management program for progressive Australia and New Zealand primary producers, Charm said the program has had a profound impact on her farming business.

“The Executive Development Program was the best learning environment I have ever been in – we broke all the barriers down, we took a good, hard look at our business’ strengths and weaknesses, and we’ve transformed the way we are operating,” Charm said.

“There were ‘ahah moments’ throughout the entire process. It is one of the best things I have ever done for myself and our business and I don’t know how anyone cannot afford to do this course. I want to thank Rabobank for putting together such a fantastic program.”

Charm said the program was incredibly helpful, “joining the dots between pure theory and getting out on-farm and doing it”.

Charm is the chief financial officer of Fairfield Farming Company Pty Ltd, the family farming business between Boggabilla in northern New South Wales and Goondiwindi, Queensland. The main enterprise is irrigated cotton with cereals in rotation. The irrigated area is 568 hectares and leased area is 448 hectares and the business also runs a cotton contract picking service.

With background in banking and finance, Charm is in charge of the administration, finance and accounting for the business with her husband, Tom, taking care of the operational ‘outdoors’ side of things.

“We play to our strengths,” Charm said.

“I knew of people that spoke highly of the Rabobank Executive Development Program and I have always been someone who wants to keep learning and grow. I don’t think you



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ever get to a point in your life where you know it all. Learning more is invigorating but I wanted to do something extra.”

Charm said she sensed there was room for improvement across their business and undertaking the program helped her assess the areas of weakness and look at ways to improve profits through a focus on yield.

“Having those goals documented and in a clear line of sight has really helped us and the truth is, you actually end up exceeding your targets,” she said.

“We wanted to improve our profitability – we were doing ok – but needed to make better profits to cope with the seasonal variations we have,” Charm said.

“We set firm and specific goals and developed the strategies to link those goals all the way through a growing season and over a number of years.”

Throughout this goal setting process, Charm realised she didn’t want to leave anything to chance in the future.

“We are always going to face weather challenges, but we are becoming more like ‘control freaks’ by not leaving the things we can control to chance,” she said.

“We didn’t really realise where the weak spots were. We had to step back and really have a good hard look at our business performance over the years and then we could see that the changes weren’t hard to address, we just had to start asking the right questions.”

She said having seen such a transformation in herself and her business, Charm’s husband, Tom, has enrolled for the 2015 Executive Development Program.

“Tom is the last person interested in book work and reading loads of theory – he chose not to attend university and he is a very hands-on, practical person – but the brilliant thing about the Rabobank program is that it suits all sorts of people and I can see Tom will gain a lot from the course,” she said.

“Robin Stonecash, the program director, is amazing at breaking down the barriers or preconceived notions of what people think of their management skills or business. She makes it such a conducive learning environment where anything is possible. We all came there with insecurities but we all became happy talk about them and learn from each other.”

Rabobank Executive Development Program director, Robin Stonecash said Charm’s project and her presentation showed she had returned home after the first week of the program, and using the tools and frameworks covered, she had taken a critical look at their business.



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“Charm had benchmarked their business against other growers, determined their key drivers of financial performance and identified the risks of their current business model and identified how to mitigate those risks, as well as finding new opportunities in the process,” Dr Stonecash said.

“Through knowing her business more thoroughly, Charm developed clear goals and strategies to create a sustainable farming business for the future. She has a clear plan that allowed her to prepare for and manage the challenges of markets and seasonal volatility – she had created a tool in the form of a proper business plan – that enables more agility in their business which means they can now respond faster to changing situations and make better decisions, both in the near and longer term.”

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Rabobank Australia & New Zealand is a part of the international Rabobank Group, the world's leading specialist in food and agribusiness banking. Rabobank has more than 110 years' experience providing customised banking and finance solutions to businesses involved in all aspects of food and agribusiness. Rabobank is structured as a cooperative and operates in 42 countries, servicing the needs of approximately 10 million clients worldwide through a network of more than 1600 offices and branches. Rabobank Australia & New Zealand is one of Australasia's leading rural lenders and a significant provider of business and corporate banking and financial services to the region's food and agribusiness sector. The bank has 93 branches throughout Australia and New Zealand.

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