

A case for conservation farming

July 2012

17 YEARS OF RECOGNITION FOR CONSERVATION AGRICULTURE

Later this month, a farmer from NSW will be handed the prestigious Conservation Farmer of the Year award, recognising their efforts in environmentally sustainable and profitable farming and their willingness to contribute to the well being of their local community and greater farming industry.

This is the 17th year of the award and farmers from the catchments of the Central West, Lachlan, Murrumbidgee and Murray were eligible to nominate again this year.



Richard Langley and Neville Gould

Conservation Agriculture and No-till Farming Association executive officer, Neville Gould said there are certain 'stand out' features of award recipients, irrespective of the farming system they have.

"They all demonstrate attention to detail, a willingness to be leaders in their field and a willingness to share their knowledge with their peers," says Mr Gould.

Past winners have included Catherine and Peter Ledger, Scott and Jo McCalman, Warwick and Janell Jones, John and Mary Single, Robert and Gwenda Stanbridge, Jack and Dione Carter, Wass brothers,

Richard Langley, David and Mary Marsh, Colin, Jason and Nick Seis, Robert and Maree Goodear, Andrew McCalman, Matt, Kim, Ian and Ruth McKenzie, John and Robyn Ive, Michael and Larissa Pfitzner and last year, Grant and Lee Byrne.

Mr Gould says, "To have these winners in our farming community raises the bar for all of us. It also gives us hope that agriculture has room to move as these former winners continue to set new levels of productivity, profitability and environmental stewardship.

"Some of the winners have developed their own machinery, new training programs and new perspectives in agricultural systems, continuing to represent the voice of organisations like CANFA in a complex environment.

CANFA chair, Richard Langley was the 2003 Conservation Farmer of the Year. He runs a 620 hectare cropping and livestock property at Greenethorpe and started conservation farming in 1987.

"That first year was a bit of a bash and try and we had to work at trying to make it work. We started using a combine and a scarifier and a set of harrows," says Richard.

The reason for the change was because he could not get canola out of the ground, as the ground was sealing after planting with conventional practices.

“The first attempt worked really well. We just put the scarifier into wheat stubble and then we sowed over the top of that with canola. It looked really horrible but it worked. We were doing something which was working but we didn’t know why it was working.”

Over the past two decades, Richard has witnessed the biggest changes in the soil. He is now at a point where he no longer has to lime his country because the system has become self-regenerating. “We started off with soil pH of 4.5, which we increased to 5.2 or 5.3. Now the stubbles are starting to kick into gear, we’re seeing further increases in the pH”, says Richard.

Not all the Conservation Farmer of the Year Award winners have been what are traditionally considered a conservation farmer. In 2009, John and Robyn Ive took out the award with not a crop grown on their 250 hectares in the Yass Valley.

Over the ensuing years, the Ives have proven their passion for farming and conservation agriculture practices, despite not growing crops. This commitment was recognised at the 2011 Carbon Farming Conference, where they took out the top prize of National Carbon Cocky of the Year.

John is also a Climate Champion, one of 34 farmers from across Australia recruited to the program in March 2010, to bridge the communication gap between scientists and farmers about managing climate risk in their local areas and for specific commodities. He has honed his skills to develop a farming program, which identifies the role of climate in productivity changes; measuring production increases independent of climatic variation.



John & Robyn Ive receive their award from Neville Gould & former chair, Anne Williams

“If you don’t measure it you can’t manage it,” maintains John. “We have monitored groundwater levels using a network of piezometers for the past 20 years, as well as acidity, soil nutrients, tree cover, impact of grazing pressure and botanical changes over time using grazing exclusion cages, dam salinity, flora and fauna lists and of course, our livestock breeding and performance records.”

Taking the award crown from the Ives in 2010 was Griffith-based farmer, Michael Pfitzner, who is often quoted as saying that “groundcover is king”. While this is an easy concept to grasp in dry years, he believes it is just as important during heavy rain events, such as those experienced earlier this year.



Michael Pfitzner, 5th from left, with the finalists of the 2010 CFOTY Award

“Standing stubble has shown that moisture infiltrates more evenly with less runoff compared to any other stubble treatment. If the soil profile is not full and we are getting runoff, then that is an opportunity wasted.”

Understanding how this works on his property is something that Michael is across in detail. He has been committed to on-farm research for over a decade, keeping detailed records of rainfall, yield mapping and undertaking a



Central West CMA's Rob McCutcheon presenting Lee & Grant Byrne with the CFOTY Award in 2011

multitude of trials.

On 23 July, the 2011 Conservation Farmer of the Year, Grant Byrne of Peak Hill will hand over the title to another farmer considered worthy of the recognition that the award brings. Grant describes his adoption of conservation farming practices as being more of an evolution rather than a conscious decision.

He describes the family's goals as being to develop a strong, profitable and sustainable, modern farming enterprise, able to adopt new practices and develop them to suit the business.

"I still consider that we have not finished our journey and have many questions still to answer and will be still striving to achieve our goals every day or at least get closer. Taking on board CANFA's idea of 'farmers teaching farmers' is a real goal for us while we're the Conservation Farmers of the Year, and we will help in any way that we can. Agriculture really is our future!"

Neville Gould says the recognition given to those leaders of conservation agriculture is only made possible by the ongoing support of the NSW Government, initially through the former Department of Land and Water Conservation and now through the Catchment Management Authorities (CMA) of Central West, Lachlan, Murrumbidgee and Murray.

"This support, financially and with staff, as well as philosophically has been fundamental to sustaining this award and providing the mechanism for its continued development.

"Two people who has been pivotal in the award's development and promotion are John Lawrie (on leave from the Central West CMA) and Ian Packer of the Lachlan CMA who have been involved since its inception," says Neville.

Both were awarded a Golden Shovel lifetime honorary membership to CANFA in 2011 and in mid-July Ian Packer retires from the Lachlan CMA. CANFA wants to sincerely thank him and wish him well in his retirement.

The 2012 Conservation Farmer of the Year Award will be announced at the Annual Conservation Agriculture Conference Dinner in Griffith on 23 July.

For more information about the Conservation Farmer of the Year Award contact CANFA on 02 6845 1044 or 0427 452 488 – canfa@bigpond.com

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