



Finalists demonstrate innovation & flexibility despite tough times

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in a nutshell

- The finalists of the IREC Irrigated Farm Competition 2006 have diverse businesses but all share a common passion for excellence in irrigation and sustainable integration of their business into the natural environment. This article profiles the 2006 finalists.

Irrigation Management & Water Use Efficiency – Tim & Sally Watson

Tim and Sally Watson farm four properties at Hillston – the three they own, *Morants*, *Lanes Bridge* and *Glenmore*, as well as share-farming a nearby property, *Hunthawong*.

The Watsons moved to Hillston from Deniliquin in 1984, when they started a contract harvesting business which grew to cover an area from Queensland to southern Victoria. In 2000, rather than upgrade their machines and lock into contract harvesting for another few years, Tim and Sally decided to sell their business and purchase their first farm *Morants*.

With family philosophies of “do it once and do it right” and “try and find an easier way to do things while still achieving the same goals”, the farms are managed in a team effort between Tim, Sally, farm manager Paul Cleton and six permanent employees.

“I try to involve everybody in most decisions and we have recently started weekly meetings to maintain or improve communication,” Tim said.

Morants was very run down when purchased by the Watsons. Redevelopment of the property began with a whole farm survey and an irrigation and drainage management plan. The property of approximately 600 ha now has 400 ha irrigated – 150 ha under drip irrigation and the balance under flood irrigation.

In 2002, the Watsons purchased *Lanes Bridge*, which was in an even poorer condition than *Morants*. They quickly installed 70 ha of irrigation to generate cash flow and are gradually developing this farm. Progress is slow however, due to the limitations of having no bore water and the fact that water is solely supplied from the river. Recent developments include two centre pivots to grow sweet corn and wheat. Other irrigation systems on the properties are border check, furrow, centre pivot and drip.

Purchased for its security of bore water, the most recent acquisition, *Glenmore* is being integrated with *Morants* with the assistance of a whole farm survey.

Crops currently grown on the properties are cotton, sweet corn, wheat, barley, maize for feed grit, high amylose maize, seed sorghum, faba beans, seedless watermelons and pumpkins.

Both Tim and Sally have agricultural backgrounds. Tim grew up on a dry area family farm south of Deniliquin. Sally has an agricultural science degree and has worked as an agronomist and agricultural teacher. Tim is also involved in local water politics and is a representative on a number of water management committees.

Irrigated farming has a lot of challenges ahead according to Tim, and Sally concurs with this view.



Figure 1: Tim Watson (right) & his farm manager Paul Cleton



"From my point of view the farm offers some very great challenges to us, both financially and socially. Developing sustainable irrigated agricultural systems is essential to long-term viability of not only our farm, but also our community. Obviously the issues affecting us as irrigators will filter, not only into our local town, but across our region and indeed the whole country. With this in mind, it is very important that we research alternative methods of farming and alternative crops," she said.

Tim and Sally have three young children and they hope that the profile and profitability of farming increases so that their children are encouraged or want to be involved in agriculture.

In 2005 the Watsons were awarded Cotton Grower of the Year in Lachlan and Murrumbidgee valleys. They were winners of the NSW Royal Agricultural Society Irrigated Wheat Crop in 2004.

Award for Natural Resource Management – Ian & Jan Auld

Ian and Jan Auld purchased a small irrigation farm, *Winilba* when they made the move to the Riverina from a property north of Broken Hill. They have worked together for 28 years in a strategic partnership on their irrigation property which pumps from the Murrumbidgee River. Their interest in irrigation efficiency began in 1982 when the volumetric allocation for a licensed river pumper was set at 972 ML.

The Auldists have raised four children on their farm and their son Bill works as operations manager at *Winilba*. A crucial member of the team, Jan contributes to the management of *Winilba* by being in charge of accounting and administrative operations as well as the management of the two farmhouses.

The family's home base is *Winilba* but over a period of time the business has been increased with the addition of two other properties.

The Auldists use border check flood irrigation to complement the non-irrigated native vegetation grazing areas. Ian says

he is inspired by farmers from the dairy industry "who have set up good examples of how to use irrigation to produce pasture".

The Auldists farm business is based on livestock. Sheep enterprises include the production of merino-white suffolk prime lambs and a merino breeding flock. This is balanced with a trading enterprise mainly in young merino sheep. Wool is regarded as a valuable enterprise and sheep are shorn every nine to ten months. First-cross and merino lambs are grain-finished and mainly sold 'over the hooks', preferably using contracts, which has been possible this year.

The cattle enterprise is also balanced between breeding and trading. In general, breeding animals are restricted to dryland pastures and irrigation is used to produce pasture for young stock as well as hay, silage and grain which is mainly used on farm.

Ian and Jan have realised that running a sustainable farming business requires the managers to work closely with government environmental regulators. For this reason Ian is involved in the Hay Landcare Group and works closely with the Murrumbidgee Catchment Management Authority as the Chairman of the Hay/Balranald Landcare Network. He also hopes to contribute as a member of the newly-constituted advisory committee for Australian Wool Innovation's Falkiner Memorial Field Station at Conargo.

The Auldists are involved in the Hay community and are happy to support its activities and development where possible. Currently Ian is on the board of Shear Outback, the Australian Shearers' Hall of Fame, which is Hay's showcase for the shearing industry and the site for the national shearing championships this October.

Award for Agricultural Management – Malcolm & Maree Brown

Malcolm Brown began farming at *Mallowdene*, a 2240 ha dry area property at Goolgowi, after he left school, where his family had traditionally grown wheat, oats, barley, canola and lupins as well as livestock. In 1978 Malcolm's parents purchased *Clifton Park* at Warburn and began



Figure 2: Ian Auld



Figure 3: Malcolm & Maree Brown



growing rice and irrigated wheat while continuing to farm *Mallowdene*. *Clifton Park* was developed with the installation of its first centre pivot irrigator, after the removal of old irrigation bays, channels and fencing, and a water storage dam was also installed.

In a new 'partnership' for Malcolm, he and Maree married in 1986 and they raised their four children at *Mallowdene*. They moved to Warburn in 2004 and developing their business partnership further purchased *Wilga Park*. They installed a centre pivot irrigator, increased water storage and converted an existing diesel pump to electricity.

Committed to sustainable farming and keen environmentalists, the Browns have planted 4500 native trees at *Clifton Park* and *Wilga Park* in recent years. They have also kept aside 200 ha of native bushland for regeneration and have replanted some of this area.

Inspired by "farmers or people who are prepared to push the boundaries and who aren't afraid to try something new", Malcolm and Maree have ventured into crops such as marphat peas, chick peas and azuki beans. Notably, in 2002–03 and at their first attempt at growing azuki beans, the Browns achieved the highest yield and quality in NSW.

Malcolm said he "likes to challenge himself by trying new crops and learning about the business and marketing side of farm management". The Browns are also dedicated to learning about their business and on-farm practices and have completed numerous education, training and safety courses.

Maree is in charge of the financial and general administration of the business as well as helping out where ever she is needed on the farm – tractor driving, planting or providing labour. But after a couple of days in the office she likes to reward herself with time on the farm, "I'm at my happiest when I'm on the land and around nature," Maree said.

Both Maree and Malcolm say they enjoy "watching things grow and the challenges that farming brings" while at the same time being very attentive to crop detail.

"Our product quality is always our priority, with farming's ever increasing overheads and market requirements, quality and quantity are essential," Malcolm said.



Figure 4: Glen & Julie Andrezza

Award for Farm Planning & Innovation – Glen & Julie Andrezza

Glen Andrezza has been growing rice and wheat on the family farm at Willbriggie for 24 years. Based at Willbriggie, he and his wife, Julie, grow 190 ha of rice and wheat, and an occasional canola crop. They also farm another property of 180 ha rotating the same crops.

Glen's commitment to the future of the rice industry is commendable. He is a delegate to the Central Executive of the Ricegrowers' Association of Australia (RGA), secretary of the Mirrool Branch of the RGA and a group leader of an RGA Environmental Champions cluster group. He also dedicates many hours on the RGA sub-committees for Farm Business and Economics, and Public Relations. Glen is also an alternate delegate for the IREC cropping systems group.

Paying close attention to crop detail and keeping abreast of best practice are everyday work practices for Glen. One of his passions is learning about new farming technology.

"I love using and seeing what new technology can do to improve farming methods," Glen said.

In 2001–02 Glen began implementing new methodologies that have improved crop watering and drainage, particularly through 'roof-topping' his bays, which means he can effectively manage water in larger paddocks. Since that time he has also continued to use multi-spectral aerial imaging of rice crops to determine zones for variable rate nitrogen fertiliser applications. The combination of variable rate fertiliser application, laser levelling and more intensive farming has delivered an increase in rice yields by up to 25% in recent years.

Apart from his passion for technology Glen says much of his knowledge has come from "the sharing of ideas with other farmers". He holds many farmers in high regard but names two mentors for their specialised knowledge in farming practices. Former IFCOM winner Graham Menzies for his extensive knowledge of growing crops and Peter Salvestro for his innovative irrigation management – both men are an inspiration to many, according to Glen.

In 2004 Glen and Julie were one of 12 irrigators in Australia selected to showcase their farming innovations at the 2004 ANCID conference. In the same year they were also runners up to Graham Menzies in the 2004 IFCOM Award for Excellence in Rice Growing.

Important to all finalists, Julie and Glen say they are in a business partnership as well as a personal one.

"We couldn't do what we do without each other," Julie said. "I think of myself as the support team and like the third leg of a stool, our business or family wouldn't stand up without us both supporting one another".

As far as farming and the future are concerned Glen said he just "loves the land and loves trying to improve what I do from year to year". 🌱

Further information

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