

A mine next door doesn't have to mean hard labour

By Theresa Kunde, Partners in Grain Coordinator

When mining and energy companies come knocking on the door it can turn farmer's lives up-side-down. But where some people see threat, others see opportunity and two such people include Wallumbilla grain and cattle growers Peter and Nikki Thompson.

Peter and Nikki farm 4000 hectares of prime agricultural country 80 kilometres north east of Roma in south-west Queensland, 1500 hectares of which supports a profitable grain operation.

Labour shortages and the encroachment of resource extraction are two of the major challenges facing modern agriculture. Like other farmers in the burgeoning resource rich Bowen and Surat Basins of Queensland, the Thompson's are simultaneously confronted by both challenges. But Peter and Nikki are dealing with the situation in such an innovative way that both farming and mining turn out winners.

Shared labour

After an extensive exploration program, Origin Energy commenced coal seam gas production in the Thompson's area in 2005. Currently two of the Thompson's neighbour's properties support 90 coal seam gas wells with nine wells planned for the Thompson's land.

So coal seam gas extraction for Peter and Nikki is something that has become a major part of their existence and some-



thing about which they have given much thought and consideration.

When Peter and Nikki's son Andrew and his friend started working casually for Origin on the neighbouring property, the Thompson's conceived the idea of a shared labour arrangement. On rostered days off and at high on-farm work periods such as planting, harvest and at other critical times, Andrew and his friend were close by and available to give a hand on the farm when required.

"Right from the outset we have gotten to know the Origin staff personally, especially the senior management," says Peter. "Origin is very keen to be neighbours rather than intruders and want to employ locals and put money back into the community."

"Senior management are creative and open minded and were keen to make our shared labour idea work."

"Of course we had to give them prior notice," adds Peter, "but it worked really

well. We had a flood that damaged a lot of our fences. I rang Origin and explained the situation and the next day I had two fit young men, my son and his friend, come over to help me fix the fences."

Andrew has moved on from the gas fields now but this relationship has shown that labour sharing between local industry and farmers can work.

Labour pool

"Most gas field jobs have extended periods of consecutive days that are rostered off. And during rostered time on there are a lot of jobs that aren't time critical, just general duties. This is the labour pool that we can tap into," Peter explains.

Peter and Nikki believe if coal seam gas workers had access to full time employment in a regional area it would decrease the 'fly in fly outs' and make working in the coal seam gas industry more attractive.

"The energy companies are starting to struggle to attract staff as well," Peter says. "A lot of the young people go to these energy and mining companies to make their fortune but when they get there they realise that the work isn't what they expected and it takes time to move into the well paid positions."

"If these workers could access farming work on their time off it would create diversity in their working situation and make



Gas well heads dot the landscape of the Wallumbilla district.



Peter Thompson in his 2008 wheat crop.

moving their families to regional areas more attractive. This is good for the mining and energy companies and good for the community."

The arrangement with the Thompson's son was so successful that Peter and Nikki are in the process of trying to make it work again with a local farm employee who wants to work for a period in the coal seam gas industry, but not lose touch with what's happening on the land.

"This is a perfect situation really," adds Peter. "Young people can get their financial start with the gas industry or mines and develop those skills while still working on-farm. They can then go back to the land full-time when they are ready, but still have the ability to work for the gas or mining company if they are needed."

"The young people get the start they need – the farmers get access to labour – the mining and gas companies get labour and the skills are not lost out of the district."

"But we do need a coordinated approach to work with the gas companies to make this pool available."

Origin's Roma-based Community Liaison Supervisor, Meryl Eddie, supports the opportunity for locals to develop and enhance education and vocational opportu-



Innovative thinking and programs are needed for a more productive relationship between farmers and the mining and energy companies.

nities. "It's a great bonus that many of our employees can live close to their families," says Meryl.

Re-think how farm labour is paid

To make a system like this work the Thompsons believe that farmers need to re-think the way they access, employ and pay their labour.

"Firstly, farmers need to pay more to create a better perception of working in

the bush," says Peter. "Instead of thinking about paying one farmhand \$50,000 per year, you need to think I have \$50,000 to pay casual labour to get the job done."

Peter believes that this attitude will make growers less likely to shy away from paying mine and gas industry equivalent wages.

"With casual labour you don't have to pay for holidays and sick days which in-

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creases your ability to pay higher wages for the periods of time when you need labour and it also makes it far more attractive for workers.”

Flexibility is the key

Of course one isolated approach is not going to solve the labour shortage that agriculture is experiencing – but it is one more piece of the puzzle.

The Queensland Partners in Grain project – a GRDC funded national project supporting women and young people in the grains industry – has been working to make grain growers aware of the different options and programs that are available to combat the labour shortage.

Queensland Chair, Liz Hill, from Thallon in south-west Queensland believes there is no silver bullet, but there are many different options that can help get a critical mass back into the regional labour force.

“Flexibility is the key to making the labour situation work,” says Liz. “The resource rich regions aren’t just rich in minerals but in people too. If we can work with companies like Origin to share this resource around then it is a winning situation for all, especially the rural communities.

“We need to start thinking creatively if we are going to attract the younger generation into rural and regional communities,” adds Liz.

And Peter and Nikki Thompson aren’t short of a creative thought or two.

“We have put a fair bit of thought into this area and by thinking a bit laterally we have used different ideas to get us by,” says Nikki. “We use a service called ‘Farm Sitters’ who are normally retired farmers to look after our place while we are on holidays. And in our cattle enterprise we back-ground for Beef Stock Market and they do all the cattle work as part of the deal.”

Peter and Nikki also have other ideas such as providing rural school leavers who want to work in the resources sector, a traineeship or mentorship in agriculture that they complete on their days off through on the job training with local farmers.

“This idea allows our youth to get a qualification in agriculture while getting industrial skills and experience,” says Nikki.

“We all work in the same landscape so we should work together to make sure our communities have a viable future,” believes Liz Hill.

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Chair of Partners in Grain, Liz Hill from Thallon in south-west Queensland.

RESOLVING MINING–FARMING ISSUES

The recent appointment of a Legal Aid solicitor in Queensland to provide free independent advice to rural landholders impacted by mining, as well as a recent series of land access forums hosted by the state’s Department of Mines and Energy, are examples of how state governments can help to solve the nationwide problem of mining and farming conflicts.

But AgForce Queensland chief executive officer Brett de Hayr said the more complicated policy and legislative issues surrounding the mining-farming interface must be recognised if the ongoing concerns of the agricultural sector are to be addressed.

“The land access forums held recently were well attended and conveyed information about landholders and miners rights and obligations, but they also highlighted the many issues regarding government policies that cut across multiple agencies,” Brett said.

“For example, there were many questions about the environmental approval process – which assesses impact on the environment – and why an agricultural impact statement is not also considered as part of the process.”

AgForce wants consideration given to the value of having land available for future food production by the Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries, in the same way that consideration is given to environmental impacts by the Environmental Protection Agency during the mining approval process.

Brett said there is an urgent need to look at agriculture from a state planning policy perspective and consider what defines the best use of land, as per leasehold land renewal rules.

“The Qld Department of Mines and Energy is to be commended for organising these land access forums and the appointment of a Legal Aid solicitor is welcome, but now the government needs to go one step further and amend the relevant legislation to make it more equitable and efficient.

“What needs to happen now is for the state Government to appoint an external person of standing to undertake an independent review of issues such as compensation, interagency enforcement activities and the adequacy of various legislative requirements.”

Brett said the Deputy Premier is taking a lead role in sorting out the conflict between mining and agriculture sectors and AgForce had a productive meeting with him recently. But the sticking points between the two sectors are likely to become the focus of Mining Summits at Dysart, Mt Isa and Dalby during November unless more progress is made.

Meanwhile, Toowoomba solicitor Glen Martin has been appointed to work with Legal Aid Queensland’s Farm and Rural Legal Service providing advice and assistance to landholders throughout the state impacted by mining and related issues.

AgForce has welcomed Glen’s appointment to a role AgForce had identified as being essential in light of the accelerated rate of exploration and mine development in Queensland.

The Legal Aid service will be free and no means test will apply. Those seeking assistance can call Legal Aid Queensland on 1300 651 188.