

PO Box 586 Moama 2731
T +61 (0)3 5480 0755 F +61 (0)3 5480 0233
E enquiries@nuffield.com.au W www.nuffield.com.au
A.B.N. 33 092 327 396

2009 SCHOLARSHIP SUPPORTERS

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Scholarship brings new perspective to apple farmer's future

A Nuffield Scholarship gives Tasmanian orchardist Thomas Frankcomb a new perspective on farming and the confidence to pursue new opportunities.

By Catherine Norwood

Tasmanian Nuffield Scholar Thomas Frankcomb may no longer be farming his family's apple orchard at Ranelagh, but six months after leaving the farm he has retained his passion for agriculture and is evaluating new opportunities.

Mr Frankcomb is a 2009 scholar, sponsored by Impact Fertilisers to study dwarf hops production. Concerned by financial pressures on farm, and the continual price squeeze from the "middle men" in the produce supply chain, he expanded his scholarship topic to investigate business models that might help growers retain a greater percentage of the retail dollar.

When he began his scholarship last year he and wife Ruth were running an 80-hectare orchard producing apples and cherries, and a contact storage and packing operation that employed up to 150 people at peak times. Their property also had hops production facilities, disused for many years, which Mr Frankcomb was hoping to put back into production.

"When I came home from my study tour, I was able to think clearly about the future of the farm for the first time in many years. We had been financially stretched for a decade, and my wife, who had been managing everything while I was gone, suggested again that we needed to re-evaluate the business."

He says having been away for a few months, he was able to approach farm's future with a more objective perspective, rather than being immersed in the day-to-day detail of getting things done.

The Frankcombs called in their financial advisers and realised that with falling returns for their produce and the high level of debt they were carrying, the business was not sustainable. Mr Frankcomb says it was a difficult decision to walk away from the farm, which had been in the family for 150 years. Within three weeks of returning from his study tour they had made the decision to leave the farm and within a couple of months had moved away from the Huon Valley.

Mr Frankcomb says that the orchard industry in Tasmania has a comparatively high cost structure, and distance from major markets in the supply chain is a part of the problem. "There are so many people in the supply chain, all taking a cut, and the margins in the industry have eroded dramatically in recent years."

As an orchardist, he says he knew before he began his scholarship that he had to do something different, but he wasn't sure what. He believes it is an issue facing the entire Tasmanian apple industry. While his decision to walk away from the farm was a drastic one, he believes that the industry as a whole needs to take stock of its future and find ways to "do things differently" along the entire production and supply chain if it is to survive.

It has been an emotional time but Mr Frankcomb says despite the difficulties leaving the farm has been one of the best decisions he has made, for his wife and children, and for his own mental health. He received support from other scholars in the Nuffield network, and having just completed his study tour, he remains confident of a future in agriculture, although not necessarily as a farmer. His first step

has been to upgrade of his diploma to a Bachelor in Business through Marcus Oldham College and Deakin University.

Mr Frankcomb says during his Nuffield scholarship search for a supply-chain business model that provided growers with a greater share of retail sales, he did not uncover any examples that stood out. But looking at a number of businesses in the UK and Europe he did find a common thread among those 'successful' businesses – those that had both satisfied producers and customers.

"I never used to put much stock in mission statements and corporate visions, but what I found is that 'successful' businesses had statements that included producers, customers, and in many cases the environment as well. Businesses that had unhappy suppliers generally had statements that only talked about their own company and their customers."

On his original study topic of hops production, he found that the UK was leading commercial hops production with new trellising systems and dwarf varieties. Both could be adapted to Tasmania, although there would need to be some breeding work to develop the best-suited varieties. Organic production would sit well with Tasmania's "environmentally pure" branding, although the reality of plant breeding meant the industry could take many years to unfold in the state.

"The UK is the most advanced in terms of production systems, and there is a real market for organic hops in the boutique brewing industry in Europe – particularly in Germany. New Zealand is already producing organic hops for this market and I think there's an opportunity for Tasmanian growers, if we can find the right varieties," Mr Frankcomb says.

For more information contact Thomas Frankcomb on 0413 542 052, email thomas.taf@bigpond.com

High-resolution photographs of Mr Frankcomb can be downloaded from www.coretext.com.au/communications_images.php.

Please contact Catherine Norwood at Coretext Communications (03) 9670 1168, cnorwood@coretext.com.au if you have any problems accessing images.

Caption 1: At the centre of world hops production in Bavaria, Germany, Nuffield Scholar Thomas Frankcomb inspects the latest German-bred high alpha hop variety Herkules, in his search for varieties that could be well-suited to Tasmania.

Caption 2: Once an apple farmer, Nuffield Scholar Thomas Frankcomb has re-evaluated his future as an orchardist and says the Tasmanian apple industry, as a whole, needs to do the same.

NUFFIELD SCHOLARSHIP APPLICATIONS CLOSE 30 JUNE 2010

Applications are now open for Nuffield Australia Farming Scholarships for travel in 2011 and will close on 30 June, 2010. Winners will be announced in October 2010. Scholarships are for primary producers aged 28 to 40 years, although applications outside this range may be considered.

Each scholarship is valued at \$28,000, sponsored by major agribusiness and industry groups across Australia. All scholars take part in a six week Global Focus Program, with up to 10 weeks of individual travel to investigate a topic of their choice.

Scholars say it has been a life changing experience, building self-confidence and decision-making skills and introducing them to a network of leading primary producers and agricultural leaders around the world.

Nuffield Australia chairman David Brownhill says personal growth is a huge benefit of the program. Its primary aim is to improve the skills of Australian primary producers, provide a global perspective of agriculture and help scholars bring back new ideas and strategies for the benefit of both individual scholars, and their respective industries.

Recent scholars have been drawn from a wide pool of primary industries and include grain and rice growers, fishers and aquaculturists, chicken, beef, lamb, goat and pork producers, woolgrowers, dairy farmers, apiarists, orchardists, horticulturalists and vignerons. Study topics have varied from the basics of production such as soil, water, crop varieties, weeds and disease to production systems, new technologies, natural resource management, biofuels, carbon trading, supply systems, marketing and public relations.

Scholars are selected for their farming and leadership capabilities, and potential to make a valuable contribution to the future of Australian agriculture. They join a growing international network of scholars, which has more than 200 members in Australia and 1300 members worldwide.

Application forms are available from Nuffield Australia on 03 5480 0755, via email, enquiries@nuffield.com.au, or from the website www.nuffield.com.au.

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