

Putting a woman in charge of hay co-op involved a cultural change

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Julie Bartlett used to be the bookkeeper at a Victorian farmers' co-operative processing hay for export.

But she's the sort of person Michael Betar says you can find everywhere in country Australia.

"I've been travelling in these areas for 20 years and I have seen so many people in agriculture, quite a few women running the show who are doing an incredible job," says the investor and commodities trader. "They are good operators in a sector that's considered male dominated."

Which is why about 18 months ago Betar promoted Bartlett to the role of general manager of Pyrenees Hay Australia — the former co-op based in Avoca, Victoria, which his company Standard Commodities Australia bought into in 2016 and has now been demutualised.

Bartlett loves the variety of a job which involves dealing with about 70 growers who ship their oaten hay through the Pyrenees, and buyers in China, Japan, Taiwan and Korea, among other countries.

But putting a woman in charge still involved cultural change.

"Before me it was all males, so having a female stepping into the role, I had to change attitudes," Bartlett says.

It's not the only change that co-op member growers have faced in the years since Pyrenees was formed in 2001 to provide hay for producers around the world. After some difficult years, in part caused by drought in what is a rich agricultural area, the co-op — including its debt — was bought by Betar's private company four years ago and demutualised.

Bartlett says that without Betar's buyout, the co-op "probably would have folded" and that the injection of funds has boosted morale of suppliers and the staff of 14 who now have more job security.

Export markets

Pyrenees (named after the Pyrenees ranges which run past Avoca) buys oaten hay from growers, reprocesses it into smaller bales to allow for better packing in containers and ships it to export markets.

Our hay is in demand overseas in countries, such as China where heavy pollution spoils the feed for dairy cows, and in other spots where it's difficult to grow feed cheaply enough.

But Bartlett concedes that shipping feed to China has been tricky in the past couple of years as farmers across eastern Australia struggled to feed their animals because of the devastating drought. But a sudden switch to supply the domestic market was not an option: "Clients rely on us to provide hay and in a good year, growers rely on us to buy their hay".

For Betar, Pyrenees is just one of many agriculture-related businesses operated by his company.

He's a big advocate for Australian rural business and believes we are very well placed to exploit the growing global demand for vegetable and animal protein. Prices have risen with demand over the past 10 years and "we produce protein more cheaply than the rest of the world because our land is far cheaply". Even with the threat of drought, our production costs mean that "you can make money in the bush".

A low Australian dollar works for exports and Betar sees great possibilities for agriculture in a world that has been up-ended over COVID-19 but still need to eat. He urges young Australians to make the change to the bush where they can afford to buy land, make money and live well — especially given the access to the rest of the world via digital technology.

A few years back when he began regularly visiting the Pyrenees operation, he bought a small property at nearby Cootamundra to stay there, rather than at a hotel. It was cheap and basic and had no power but Betar has loved the quality of life.

“I think we have a changing dynamic with the (COVID-19) virus,” he says.

He believes that we will face similar viruses in the future and the country will appeal to people who have suffered through a pandemic which – for now, at least – is having a bigger impact on cities rather than rural areas.