Murrumbidgee Irrigation

Case Study

William Barnhill
Organic Farmer
Leeton, NSW

Water is the most important asset for organic farmer William (Bill) Barnhill. His family have been growing rice and cereals on their Leeton property for almost 100 years and while he has been sceptical of changes in water delivery in the past, he now could not appreciate more how the industry has developed and grown.

WATER - A WAY OF LIFE

"Being rice farmers, water is of the upmost importance to our way of life—without water we would be subsistence farmers."

Bill's Northern Irish grandfather bought their farm in 1927 which was then handed down to him and his wife two generations later.

Bill took on organic farming in the 1980s out of a commitment to greater environmental concern, but less than a decade later economic challenges meant they had to change practices.

However, by the turn of the century, organic produce was in high demand again and so Bill and his family saw the prospects of farming organic rice.

Throughout the 40 odd years Bill has been farming, Murrumbidgee Irrigation has been working with him and his business on a number of key projects, including moving a large drainage channel and supplying trees and fences for seepage control and biodiversity enhancement.

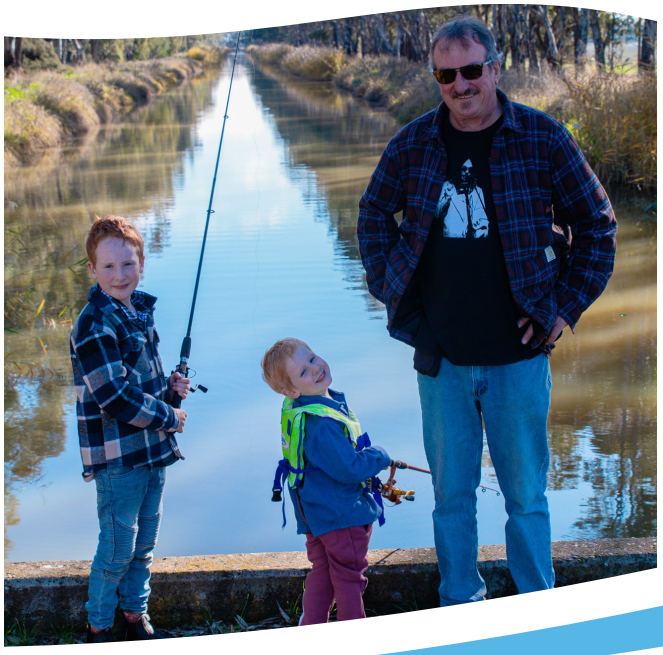
CHANGE IS A POSITIVE THING

Bill admits that he hasn't always been enthusiastic about innovations in the industry, but he now appreciates how MI embraced change and have made water delivery and usage more efficient.

"When I started on the farm in the mid-seventies we had waterwheels, unlimited water and high-water tables. I was sceptical when outlets replaced water wheels but before long, I could see the benefits. No more Yabbie hole leaks, you could drive over the outlet, and it was easy to calibrate. In hindsight the waterwheel was an antiquated device, and quite dangerous."

AUTOMATION

"I was again hesitant when the automation started. Why spend all that money if nothing is broken? We have seven outlets and last year one was automated as well as the channel.



BILL WITH HIS GRANDSONS, WILL & PATRICK

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Now I know why the money was spent."

"Automation is the greatest innovation. I can sit on a beach miles away and check the water at the outlet, stop or vary it with six hours' notice. In the old days you had to beat the water baler to the MI mailbox with a handwritten note by 7am!"

MOVING FORWARD WITH MI

"We have an ongoing relationship with MI as the only water provider (there is no Woolworths or Coles with water delivery). I am looking forward to the future working with MI—automation will solve all the problems I have had with water delivery in the past."

"Being a rice farmer water is the most important input. You can't be an organic rice farmer in Australia without water, which makes MI the provider of the most important asset in irrigation farming."

A BRIGHT FUTURE

"The future of farming in this area has never looked brighter. At the moment we're enjoying high commodity prices, and plenty of water.

I feel that the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area has been undervalued. We have an environmentally sound natural asset and the knowledge to manage it well.

The future is so bright—we're gonna need shades!"