

Good Afternoon Everyone and welcome to Port Augusta and the 6th Biennial Lake Eyre Basin Conference.

* My name is Sharon Oldfield and I live at Cowarie Station in South Australia. Cowarie has been in the family for four generations and we will be awaiting the arrival of the first member of the fifth generation who is expected to arrive in January.

I have been a member of the Lake Eyre Basin Community Advisory Committee for many years now and continue to be involved as I have a deep commitment to sustainable management in the region and recognize that we are part of a whole system, what happens in one part could affect other parts.

* We live in a region where the climate can be best defined as highly variable and erratic. We have seen classic examples of this variability over the last few years with 2006, 2007 and 2008 experiencing one of the worst droughts in Australia's history and 2010 and 2011 receiving some of the highest rainfalls in a hundred years.

* *Frank Badman said in 1999*

"All that is predictable is that there will be very dry years when there is no vegetation growth at all and very wet years when there is massive germination & growth. These two extremes may occur several years apart, but they will occur."

* In 1971 my father in law, after surviving the dry periods experienced though the 1960's used his initiative and took the opportunity to bale some of the native pastures that grew following the flood. From an area totalling 200 acres (81ha) 10,000 small bales of natural pasture hay was baled. This calculates to approximately 30ton per 200 acres or 370.3kg per hectare.

You have all heard of the saying from little thing's big things grow? Well so is the story behind OBEORGANIC. I am an organic producer and a founding shareholder of OBEORGANIC. Cowarie achieved full Organic certification in 1998. I would like to talk to you about the story behind OBEORGANIC.

In 1994, four graziers signed up for a number of Property Management Workshops to be held in Thargomindah. Graziers attended the workshops hoping to upgrade computer skills, explore marketing of their own products and fine-tune financial planning skills.

As the four graziers worked on property management plans an idea was floated that would capitalize on their isolation.

At the same time another group of graziers from Birdsville and far north South Australia were having similar ideas. At a series of meetings held in south-west Queensland these two groups of graziers met and discussed their visions.

Our cattle are raised with no growth hormones in a completely natural environment that is not tainted with chemicals or pesticides offered an opportunity to adopt certified organic production.

A market development mission to Japan was undertaken by representatives of the producer group. The Japanese trip cemented in their minds that there was a real opportunity to market organic beef. The Japanese appeared to find the prospect of dealing directly with producers something that they valued and wanted to continue.

We asked ourselves “Could we do this...Could we sell Organic beef to the world?”

To do this we not only had to learn how to sell our product to prospective customers, we had to learn how to negotiate in various cultures, and learn all aspects of our supply chain. We had to find an abattoir that was willing to obtain Organic certification and persuade transport companies to undergo a series of training workshops to enable them to carry certified stock.

We developed accurate accountable record keeping systems, gained an export license, became familiar with International accreditation standards, to name just a few.

We were a group of outback cockies and suddenly we found ourselves developing international contracts, marketing our beef and our whole method of production. We brought international buyers to Australia, to the middle of the outback, to our properties so they could really experience our story – giving them a real insight into what we did what we were all about.

We now have developed markets for our organic beef in Australia, the Middle East, the USA, Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia & Indonesia.

*** The OBE COMPANY was formed in 1995 as an initiative of some 30 growers. The area collectively owned by these producers exceeds 7 million hectares and represents the largest organic beef project in Australia, perhaps the world, with a collective herd size of approximately 75,000 head. We have now expanded to two offices. The main office is in Hendra Queensland Our new office in Hong Kong was opened in 2010.**

The MLA’s Industry Collaborative Agreement program for exporters provided an enormous amount of assistance over the years as we undertook research into various markets.

*** OBE supplies prime cuts and over the years has diversified into organic meatball and burger production and has formed a successful partnership with an American based company Organic Prairie.**

Producers and shareholders are encouraged to be involved in the market chain and are regularly invited to travel with sales staff into export markets. These trips allow producers to gain a better understanding of OBE requirements.

I have been on three of these trips once to Tokyo and twice to the USA. My first trip to the USA was in 2005. What a whirlwind itinerary. Our first stop was a trade fair at the MGM Grand Casino Las Vegas. Now how many people do you know who get to set up a Barbie in the MGM Grand Casino and cook burgers all day?

Then we visited New York, Chicago, Wisconsin and Texas all in 8 days.

Our trip also involved meeting the CEO's of several large supermarket chains, attending an organic grower's conference in Lacrosse Wisconsin, organic farm visits, visits to a few US organic supermarkets, meeting our US importer and attending the World Livestock Congress in Houston Texas.

It was amazing to hear how many Americans asked if our cattle were vegetarian?

*** In 2008 OBE was invited to supply beef for the G'Day USA program. A group of us attended the joint functions in New York and Los Angeles. Wow what an amazing contrast to outback SA. At the New York banquet Harrison Ford was just an arm length away!! We of course were concerned that the beef would not be to perfection and had the opportunity to go into the kitchens of the Waldorf Astoria Hotel to check on chef...WOW unbelievable kitchens !**

Ten years ago we considered ourselves to be advanced by using the internet to conduct business

Today we are embracing social media to enhance our region, our corporate reputation and interact with global organic communities OBE has a Facebook page and a Twitter account.

OBEORGANIC launched their new web site in December 2012

It's been an incredibly rich journey although like any developing business we have at times been scared, were we running before we had learned to walk?

We have felt we are knocking our head against a brick wall, we have felt like walking away.

Thank goodness we were lucky enough to have a constant supply of faith and good humor.