

Regional development and a global Sydney

Site visit report

The Tweed and Armidale
August 2017



Site visit to The Tweed

The Standing Committee on State Development visited The Tweed on Monday 28 August 2017.

The committee travelled to Carool in the Tweed hinterlands to meet with Peter Burr and Gareth Leslie, the owners of Potager. Potager is a kitchen garden restaurant located on a 10 acre farm. The restaurant places an emphasis on organic and locally sourced food and exceptional service and, though only open for a year, has built a high profile with outstanding reviews.

Peter and Gareth advised that, having purchased the property some 12 years ago, it was planned for combined use as a restaurant and bed and breakfast. However, red tape proved prohibitive for the bed and breakfast and so focus was turned to the restaurant.

Since launching the restaurant the Potager team have gone from strength to strength, building a thriving business that also makes a point of supporting local producers and businesses. Peter and Gareth have utilised the skills of local tradespeople in the construction of the restaurant and furniture, local artisans in sourcing tableware, and source their meat and other produce from local providers and growers, some just ‘over the next hill’. However, the business has not been without its challenges, mostly again attributable to red tape and border issues. The restaurant is subject to significant regulatory burdens in the form of noise regulations and other related mechanisms, necessitating costly compliance studies and constant vigilance. While the team have a strong and collaborative relationship with Tweed Shire Council, they believe there is scope to introduce a more pragmatic approach to some of these regulations.

The Potager team also advocated for the NSW Government to take a more inclusive approach to regional communities like the Tweed that lie on the outskirts of the state, observing that these communities can sometimes suffer from cross-border neglect.

Cross-border conflicts have also impacted on the everyday operations of the restaurant, as the team have struggled to access taxi transport for guests. Many guests live or stay in Queensland, where New South Wales taxi drivers are unable to deliver passengers. Similarly, the team is unable to utilise Queensland tax drivers, who cannot pick up passengers over the border. While Peter and Gareth advocated for a more commonsense approach to cross-border tensions, they have found a creative and workable solution in the interim, utilising Uber where possible and partnering with quality local AirBnB service providers to accommodate their guests.

Peter advised that working together this way benefits everyone – restaurant guests can avoid the usual risks inherent in booking accommodation over the internet and avoid post-dinner travel, transforming a beautiful dinner into a relaxing short getaway; Potager has been able to attract a broader customer base who might otherwise have viewed the restaurant’s rural location as a disincentive to visit; and local hosts have benefited from a steady stream of visitors. As Peter observed, ‘locals support us so we support them. That approach assists this community to thrive’.

The key points and issues raised during the committee’s visit to Potager were:

- The need for all levels of government to work together to reduce red tape for small businesses
- The need to find pragmatic solutions to cross-borders issues and conflicts

- Support for small businesses to relocate and foster strong and collaborative networks in regional areas.

Site visit to Armidale

On Tuesday 29 August 2017 committee members undertook a site visit to the University of New England Smart Farm.

University of New England ‘Smart Farm’¹

UNE SMART Farm and Innovation Centre has transformed ‘Kirby-Newholme’, a 7,000 acre commercial farm located 10 kilometres north west of the campus, into a SMART Farm (Sustainable Manageable Accessible Rural Technologies Farm). Kirby-Newholme is one of several commercial farms owned by the university, and while the university has owned the farm for over sixty years, the ‘precision agriculture’ dimension was introduced to the farm approximately 10 years ago.

The committee met with:

- Professor David Lamb, McClymont Distinguished Professor (Research), Precision Agriculture Research Group, University of New England
- Ms Sarah Burrows, Protocol Officer, University of New England.

The committee heard that the farm was designed primarily as a learning and outreach space. The floor of the classroom and office building has been designed so as to impress on occupants the sense that the building is a continuation of the farm’s landscape and floorscape. Professor Lamb explained that the key purpose of the training provided and the operation of the farm as a whole is to remind all who interact with the farm to never forget who their clients and stakeholders are: farmers.



The farm has been established as a demonstrator site, showcases the latest technologies aimed at improving productivity, environmental sustainability, safety, workflow and social/business support networks on Australian farms. The university invested heavily to be linked by AARNet and the national broadband network (fibre, terrestrial wireless and satellite). The committee heard that satellite connectivity was chosen to demonstrate the huge possibilities presented by this mode of connectivity – the farm is able to run complex data networks at a cost of \$50/year via satellite, which would otherwise cost \$1500/month on a normal telco plan.

The farm utilises a mesh network comprised of a series of probes dotted around the farm which send information to each other. Projects on the site have included:

- chicken analytics,
- quadbike safety analytics,
- use of drones to streamline everyday farm management tasks such as checking and weighing livestock and verifying water levels in troughs,
- research into noxious weeds.

¹ Information in this report was obtained from the University of New England SMART Farm’s website, <https://www.une.edu.au/research/research-centres-institutes/smart-farm>, and during consultation with representatives of the SMART Farm during the committee’s site visit.

Projects are undertaken both on and off farm. The farm is connected to 29 sites around the country and analytical work canvasses wool, grain, mining and other industries. The university has prioritised the use of technological solutions developed by New South Wales companies and sees themselves as the conduit between a growing community of innovators and start-ups that has formed around them – “we bring the dreamers, the doers and the dollars together”, said Professor Lamb.

Other projects in which the SMART Farm have collaborated include:

- The farm has served as a test-site for new technologies identified through the UNE SMART Region Incubator, a friendly, focused and connected space built to join regional businesses with growth potential together with academic business research, business mentors, corporate and community partners. For example, a tech company that developed a new form of drone to assist with mustering animals used the connections formed through the Incubator to trial the technology on the SMART Farm.
- The ‘Agmentation’ hackathon, in which the SMART Farm invited 15 engineers from CISCO to find low-tech solutions (ie for a mobile phone with one to two bars of internet coverage) to everyday problems posed by regional farmers. Local tech startups and students were also invited to participate. The engineers were asked to make a ‘shark tank’ pitch at the conclusion of the day and the event was so successful that both CISCO and the local community have requested that the university run two events per year in future.

The key issues highlighted during the visit to the SMART Farm were:

- NBN is critical infrastructure for regional communities – “like roads and hospitals”, using the analogy provided by Professor Lamb.
- Government should also look at opportunities to make satellite connectivity available to regional businesses, particularly those that require tech connectivity across a sprawling landmass, such as farmers.
- Strong business networks are key to encouraging innovation and collaboration in regional communities.
- Ag tech will be a key driver for economic growth in regional areas in the future. Those communities who have the infrastructure in place to roll out new technological solutions, and the educational opportunities available to skill-up farmers and other agribusiness workers, will be better placed to do business in the global markets of the future. Additional funding to fuel research and development in this area would be of benefit to the people of regional New South Wales.