

Media background

June 1, 2021

Documentary: *Fightback Farmers*

Watch: ABC – June 15 9.30pm AEST (ABC iview – available from 10.30pm AEST)

#FightbackFarmers

SUMMARY

Facing the challenge of a lifetime, Australian farmers and fishers are banding together in a modern take on an old way of working together. *Fightback Farmers* is the story of Australian farmers and working together to save their family farms and fisheries from corporate takeover and to protect their local communities and way of life.

SYNOPSIS

Fightback Farmers: Feeding Australia Together is a new ABC documentary featuring local heroes showing why co-operative farming is the best solution for modern agriculture and its communities.

The story of small Australian family farmers and fishers facing the challenge of a lifetime. Long cherished as the backbone of a nation and the heart of local communities, over time Australia's family farms have been disappearing. But the fightback is on. David is taking on Goliath. Farmers and fishers are banding together in a modern take on an old way of working together – the co-operative.

It's time to meet some of the brave Australian farmers and fishers fighting to turn the tide and save their farms, protect their local communities, and preserve a way of life.

As we discover, it's not an easy journey for our farmers struggling to find their feet in the new co-operatives.

In *Fightback Farmers: Feeding Australia Together* we meet resilient dairy farmers in Victoria's Alpine region trying to come back from the brink of financial disaster following the collapse of Australia's largest dairy processor, brave lobster fishermen on South Australia's Limestone Coast going global in the wake of a devastating trade crisis and the corporatisation of the industry and the Victorian country town and its co-operative who through innovation and resilience survived to build back better in the wake of an industry collapse.

BACKGROUND

As the hunger to feed and clothe Australia and millions around the world intensifies, our farming nation faces a great challenge. To meet that demand, the pressure is on farms to consolidate, become larger and more industrialised. "Go big or go home" seems to be the mantra. This seismic shift is creating a fault line across Australia and small family farms are at the epicentre. Long considered the backbone of agriculture and the lifeblood of local communities, family farms of all sizes are disappearing. **In the past 60 years, the total number of farms across Australia has plummeted by a staggering 50 per cent.**

Under pressure from the big players, how should small family farms respond? And should they even bother in the face of an increasingly corporatised system of factory farms and fisheries? How do they

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fight for their financial future, for their families, their regional communities and the next generations?

During the COVID pandemic we all woke up to the importance of food security. Just how self-reliant are we when it comes to putting meat and bread on the table and milk in the fridge. In this new documentary we lift the lid on the thousands of Aussie farmers making sure our food supply chains stay free of economic pressure from larger players. At the same time producing food that we can literally trace back to the farm gate. Yet, it's these farmers who face some of the biggest challenges.

With so much at stake, some farmers are banding together in a brave strategy that might be the answer. They're turning back the clock to co-operative farming - a modern take on working together that could mean the family farm remains the cornerstone of Australian agriculture. They are finding strength in numbers. We meet the farmers and fishers taking charge of their lives, their environment, their communities, and their families.

MEET THE FARMERS

Fightback Farmers is the story of small Australian family farms and fishers taking on large corporations - fighting back in the face of the challenge of a lifetime. Together, many are turning to a modern take on an old way of farming and fishing – the co-operative model.

In this documentary, we explore three co-ops all borne out of circumstances. Two of the three co-ops are new and still struggling to find their feet. They are Mountain Milk Co-operative in the Kiewa Valley of north eastern Victoria and the Limestone Coast Fishermen's Co-operative in South Australia. Mountain Milk was borne out of the collapse of the Murray Goulburn dairy empire. Limestone Coast Fishermen's Co-operative was formed to fend off larger corporate approaches and support the local fishers through strength in numbers.

The third is a farmers co-op created to support the old Victorian tobacco industry. It's called TAFCO in the town of Myrtleford. Now more than 30 years old, TAFCO struggled to survive when tobacco farming drew its last breath in 2006 until it found strength in the ideas and innovation of the farmers themselves.

STUART CROSTHWAITE - Dairy Farmer (Mountain Milk Cooperative)

A fifth-generation dairy farmer, Stuart had just taken over the family farm from his father when disaster struck. The large milk co-operative, Murray Goulburn, collapsed. But rather than quit and lose everything, Stuart took the bold step of coming together with his neighbours to form a new but much smaller co-operative. Three years later, Mountain Milk is starting to turn a corner, but Stuart is peddling fast to ensure his farm provides a secure future for his wife Sarah and their two young children. It's a struggle. "It's not about us, it's not about self-greed," says Stuart. "It's about building something for the next generation and the one beyond that."

TERESA HICKS - Dairy Farmer (Mountain Milk Cooperative)

Teresa turned to her neighbours to save the family dairy farm she recently took over from her mother. Being a member of Mountain Milk Cooperative gives Teresa and her partner, Darren, the opportunity to invest and expand their farm in readiness for the birth of their first child. Teresa has a lot on her plate and it's important her neighbours work together to look out for each other. Teresa is determined to fight against big corporates threatening her family's way of life. "You can't just keep treating animals like they're a machine," says Teresa. "It's important that we get back to those fundamental roots."

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SCOTT MACKILLOP - Dairy Farmer (Mountain Milk Cooperative)

Scott's ancestors are pioneers of dairy farming in Victoria's beautiful Kiewa Valley. Rather than be the one who ended 150 years of family history, Scott took the risk of becoming a founding member of the fledgling Mountain Milk Co-operative. His goal is to leave his dairy farm as an environmentally sustainable legacy for his three children. At 6 ft 10 in, Scott is a towering figure in the community, running the farm with his wife, Belinda. He admits there can be tension in a co-op of passionate farmers. "It doesn't matter whether it's the primary school or the football club or whatever. People work together for better outcomes as a natural part of rural communities," says Scott.

FRED PIZZINI - Winemaker (TAFCO)

Tobacco plantations once dominated the lush green fields of northern Victoria. But with the Australian industry starting to collapse in the 1990s, visionary Fred Pizzini spotted an opportunity to transform his parent's King Valley farm into a vineyard. He's never looked back. Central to the success of his family business is TAFCO, the agricultural store co-operative in town of Myrtleford supplying communities for the past 30 years. Without it, Fred's family business would struggle to survive. His four children now run the tobacco farm turned winery. "It's got its challenges at times, but with good strong family values, working as a team, it can work. I'm very proud," says Fred.

SILVANA MICHELI - Pasta Maker (TAFCO)

Resilient Silvana Micheli, a second-generation farmer of Italian origin, was rocked when her family's lucrative tobacco farm was forced to shut when the Australian industry imploded in 2007. Unsure of what to do next, Silvana turned to her late mother's traditional pasta recipes for inspiration. She now runs a fully-fledged family business – thanks to her extended family – but it's hard work. Now in her 70s, Silvana relies on TAFCO to deliver supplies 70 kilometres away in picturesque Myrtleford in country Victoria. "After the tobacco had folded, we had the bush fires a few months later," says Silvana. "Then we had floods. I fell into a dark hole and struggled to get myself out of it."

CRAIG ('SLIM') REILLY - Rock Lobster Fisherman (Limestone Coast Fishermen's Co-operative)

Colourful rock lobster fisherman Slim Reilly was caught in the recent trade crossfire. His family fishing business would have collapsed if not for the local co-operative. Its strength in numbers in the southern zone of South Australia helped open new export markets and offered hope of another fishing season and not having to sell his boat - for now. A big community leader, Slim was pivotal in forming the Limestone Coast Fishermen's Co-operative in 2019. "He's got seawater running through his veins," says Slim's wife Mandie. "He's so passionate about fishing and his family."

MEET THE CO-OPS

Cream of the Crop

Dairy farming in the rolling fields of north east Victoria went into a nosedive when Australia's largest milk processor collapsed. Faced with a do or die decision, eight small dairy farmers took the bold step of creating their own co-operative. Mountain Milk was born. 150 years of ancestral farming on their lands compelled Stuart, Scott and Teresa to fight for their family farms and their way of life. In control of their destiny again, the farmers have set their own milk price and are investing with confidence. But having seen one large co-operative collapse, will Mountain Milk survive?

Rising from Tobacco's Ashes

It wasn't that long ago that Australia boasted a thriving tobacco industry. In north eastern Victoria, the tobacco farmers relied on the co-operative TAFCO for all their needs. For 20 years, TAFCO was the heart and soul of the community. But when Australia's tobacco growing industry imploded in 2007, TAFCO lost half its business and faced ruin. Rather than shut up shop, the agricultural supply

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business in the country town of Myrtleford reinvented itself to help the struggling community diversify. Today TAFCO has 630 loyal members, many of Italian descent. Committed to community, TAFCO delivers products free of charge within an 80 kilometre radius and co-ordinates mental health workshops for farmers hit by bushfires and other hardships. Passionate about his community, co-op member Lachlan Campbell created the ever-expanding Myrtleford Farmers' Market. But it's not easy. Lachlan fears the co-op could still fail if it focuses on profit instead of community.

Between a Rock and a Hard Place

The Limestone Coast Fishermen's Co-op is just two years old, it started out of necessity and has grown to become an important part of its local community, providing employment and a much needed economic boost. They strongly believe their move to a co-operative structure has loosened the grip of corporately-owned factories and processors on their local seafood industry and brought longer term benefits for the smaller, generational fishing families and their coastal towns and communities. At the heart of the co-op is legendary fisherman Slim Reilly, thankful to have the strength in numbers of the co-op to face the export crisis during COVID. Key to the co-operative's survival is Justin Phillips, their young CEO, equally shrewd in both town and country. But their next season is unknown territory for the fishing families of South Australia's southern-most coastline.

CREDIT LINE

Fightback Farmers: Feeding Australia is produced by **Barking Mad Productions**.

Fightback Farmers: Feeding Australia Together was funded with the assistance of the Co-operative Farming project supported by the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment through funding from the Australian Government's Starting Farm Co-operatives Program. The Co-operative Farming program is managed by the Business Council of Co-operatives and Mutuals.

BIOGRAPHY OF KEY CREW

Steve Bibb – Executive Producer and Writer

Steve is the owner of Barking Mad Productions. He is the former Head of Factual at the ABC and is an award-winning executive producer and factual content creator. At the ABC, Steve set the vision and creative strategy for the highly acclaimed Factual department. He built a vibrant team responsible for the development, commissioning, production, delivery, and creative excellence of storytelling that entertained and surprised. Steve commissioned many titles from producers that brought acclaim, awards, new audiences and ignited national conversations including the hit series, War on Waste. Before the ABC, Steve enjoyed success as a producer with the likes of CJZ – where he created Great Southern Land and many more – and Ambience Entertainment. Steve also spent a decade as a producer and executive producer at the Nine Network where he rose through the ranks from news bulletin to creating and running factual and factual entertainment. A former newspaper journalist in both Sydney and London, Steve is the co-author of two books.

Tara King – Executive Producer

Tara is a television executive with a successful record of launching and re-launching entertainment businesses and brands. Tara's vision is to find engaged audiences and then the right medium to deliver content they will find compelling. It is this belief that has to lead her to develop, drive and produce varied content across Live, Broadcast, and Digital. As a creative, Tara has a passion for turning great ideas into the "real thing". With a belief that the right people, thinking, and ideas can catapult a business, she has found herself leading a diverse range of creative projects from a live broadcast of the Powderfinger Breast Cancer concert on the Opera House steps, to the EP of many television series to promoting and producing a live show in 20 countries around the world.

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Kay Pavlou – Director, Producer and Writer

Kay is a multi-award-winning director and writer of drama and documentary for both television and cinema. In documentary, as company director of Dream TV, Kay was co-producer, writer and series director for the six-part documentary series Race to London. She's written and directed several episodes of the documentary series Who Do You Think You Are? – including Adam Goodes and Toni Collette – as well Recognition: Yes or No?, Family Footsteps 2, Desperately Seeking Sheila, Gangs of Oz, China – Monumental Vision, Under One Roof, Pirate Patrol and Cyprus – A People Divided. In drama, Kay has directed All Saints, McLeod's Daughters and Love Is A Four Letter Word. Kay's short film, The Killing of Angelo Tsakos and her feature film, Mary, were released to acclaim.

SUMMARY

KEY CREATIVE PERSONNEL

Executive Producers: Steve Bibb and Tara King

Director and Producer: Kay Pavlou

Writers: Steve Bibb and Kay Pavlou

Director of Photography: Terry Webster

Editor: Jenny Hicks

KEY CAST

Stuart Crosthwaite - Dairy Farmer

Sarah Crosthwaite - Dairy Farmer

Scott McKillop - Dairy Farmer

Teresa Hicks - Dairy Farmer

Fred Pizzini - Wine Maker

Silvana Micheli - Pasta Maker

Tony Vaccaro - Manager, TAFCO Rural Supplies

Lachlan Campbell – Wine Maker and TAFCO Director

Craig (Slim) Reilly - Rock Lobster Fisherman

Mandie Reilly - Fisher

Justin Phillips - CEO Limestone Coast Fishermen's Co-Operative

WATCH

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CONTACT

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