Fact Sheet

Roseworthy Old Collegians Association Inc.

Roseworthy

# ROCA AWARD OF MERIT 2023 – Neil Pontifex

Neil Colin Pontifex (RDA 1973) graduated from Roseworthy Agricultural College with Diploma of Agriculture.

His ROCA Award of Merit honour was bestowed because of Neil's inspiring leadership, entrepreneurship and innovation in dryland farming.

He is an exemplary South Australian rural community member and leader, a highly successful marketer of Kangaroo Island grain and a strong supporter of South Australian Agricultural Education.

His professional farming career commenced after graduation when he returned to the 800 hectare family farm at Paskeville. Within his local community, Neil soon assumed leadership roles in various local sporting clubs and organisations. In the 1980s, Neil quickly recognised the huge farming potential of GPS technology and became heavily involved with Precision Farming Australia (PFA). After an initial role developing the interpretation of data from header yield monitors to produce yield maps, he pioneered the development of the first boom spray GPS guidance systems.

An early adopter of Continuous Cropping that he made sustainable by including lentils in his Paskeville crop rotation, Neil's success influenced other local farmers to adopt these practices which contributed significantly to the profitability of Yorke Peninsula farming. In 2001 Neil and wife Rosemary purchased 400 hectares of 26-inch/635 mm rainfall grazing land at Vivonne Bay on Kangaroo Island with the intention of turning it into reliable cropping country. The Vivonne Bay expansion initiative initially proved to be unprofitable due to the crippling cost of shipping grain from Kangaroo Island to the mainland and the high rainfall that resulted in waterlogged crops or frequently bogged machinery. Neil then adopted the then innovative practice of delving his soil to a depth of one metre.

He also engaged in aerial spraying to resolve waterlogging and before long the use of the plane took over his seeding, fertilising and all aspects of weed, pest and disease control.

In 2004 Neil and two other Kangaroo Island growers formed the Kangaroo Island Canola Company (KICC) to directly supply a Japanese oil crusher with non-genetically modified canola. This was followed by Neil establishing Kangaroo Island Pure Grain (KIPG) with three other KI farmers to provide premium returns for Kangaroo Island grain growers and offset the exorbitant freight cost that KI farmers faced when sending their grain to the mainland. The next farming innovation introduced to the area by Neil was the inclusion of waterlogging tolerant broad beans in a three-year cropping rotation system with Canola and Biscuit Wheat.

Neil has been a leader in the non-GM crop field, resulting in Kangaroo Island now being the only part of South Australia that has been declared a GM-free region. During his time on Kangaroo Island, Neil's landholdings grew from the initial 400 hectares to over 4,400 hectares. Neil is a member of a group of leading farmers who fund the Agribusiness Leaders Scholarship. This group of leading farmers sponsor scholarships for agricultural students studying at the University of Adelaide.