

True Blue Certification: Fair Farms all the way

Marsha Aralar, Fair Farms

Boosting the horticulture industry's reputation is a priority for growers who undertake Fair Farms certification. Delivered and developed by Growcom, the Fair Farms program is a certification process that provides a mechanism for growers to demonstrate that they are ethical employers.

Fair Farms is a certification that complements the existing structure of a grower's business, through online self-assessments, audits and training. Within the berry industry, the Fair Farms certification program continues to build momentum.

With 150 berry growers spread across northern New South Wales, the OzGroup Co-op needed to come up with a solution to demonstrate their business standards. Enter Josh Akau, who joined OzGroup in late 2020 as the WH&S and Compliance Manager. He and his team work hard to help berry growers in the Co-op on their path to Fair Farms certification.

"When I started in December 2020, only seven of the 150 growers were registered with Fair Farms," Mr Akau said.

While some of the growers were Sedex-certified already, Fair Farms, with its Australian focus, helps berry growers understand the ins and outs of Federal legislation and where their operation is positioned against WH&S and HR requirements.

It's a system that supports Australian standards and is fit for use. As a result of Mr Akau's strong belief in the Fair Farms program, OzGroup growers are now turning to it too.

"By March 2021, 99 growers had registered and completed the online self-assessment component of the Fair Farms certification process."

"At the end of the day this is their farm, not our farm," Mr Akau said. "Fair Farms registration is easy and not overly complicated."

It's this understanding - Mr Akau putting himself in the shoes of the grower - that's proving to be the shining light in uptake of the program, once growers understand the possible incentives that come with Fair Farms certification.

"If you know the rules around wage payments, including allowances and Workplace Health and Safety requirements, then you'll avoid a penalty from a regulator," Mr Akau said. "It may help in retaining staff in the future too."

Mr Akau said that as understanding legislation can be vexing and open for interpretation; the Fair Farms process acts as a guide for berry growers to navigate the complex nature of meeting supermarket and consumer requirements. Mr Akau said Co-op berry growers understand the importance of being able to show their business benchmarks to consumers, through Fair Farms certification.

"That's definitely important - they [consumers] are quite conscious these days - they know what they're buying, and they look at who they are buying from, where it is coming from."

Besides consumer attitudes, Mr Akau is frank about the initial phase of bringing growers into line with Fair Farms. He said for the growers, who often rely on their native Punjabi to communicate, the process initially seemed daunting because they didn't know what kind of compliance the Fair Farms program would demand of their businesses.

Mr Akau and his team sensed this and subsequently put together special guidance, visiting growers individually and providing in-language resources.

“Farmers are receptive, but the main challenge is the unknown,” Mr Akau said, who proactively nips this challenge in the bud. “Fair Farms has not come out with anything different [business beliefs]; it’s based on normal business obligations and requirements and that’s what we communicate to growers: If you function as a business you just need to meet these requirements in general.

“My goal is to get everyone in the OzGroup to meet the Fair Farms standard, I’m sold on the Standard.”

Fair Farms National Program Manager Marsha Aralar said that a lot of businesses shudder at the thought of the auditing process, but chances are the business is operating at a standard that conforms.

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With Fair Farms certification, growers will be able to show their commitment to fair work practices — and this will mean greater access to a talented pool of workers who want to work for a good boss,” Ms Aralar said. “By reaching certification with Fair Farms, a farm stands a far greater chance of attracting and retaining motivated and reliable staff.”

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Fair Farms recently celebrated its second anniversary. For more information on this Growcom-incubated program product, visit www.fairfarms.com.au.



Josh Akau, WH&S and Compliance Manager, said he is sold on the Fair Farms standards.

Photo credit: OzGroup



Blueberries being picked at an OzGroup member farm

Photo credit: Jane Richter