

Innovation has transformed GippsBeef from a small marketing alliance, into the producer and distributor of two unique products – Gippsland Natural and Enviomeat.

Our story began in 1999 when a group of Gippsland beef farmers formed an alliance to promote and market top quality Gippsland beef. Market research had revealed that consumers were seeking meat grown as naturally and humanely as possible, but were not prepared to sacrifice quality.

Our beef fitted the bill perfectly. Grassfed, free of antibiotics and growth hormones, and allowed to roam freely over Gippsland's lush paddocks, our cattle are grown in conditions that naturally produce top quality, tender beef. But we recognized that retailers and consumers demanded a *guarantee* of quality and tenderness to distinguish our meat from other meat on the shelves.

That's where our first innovation came in. In association with Meat and Livestock Australia (MLA), we developed a strategy to ensure that all our beef meets the high standards demanded by consumers. All our beef is graded under the Meat Standards Australia beef grading system, and only that meat which is graded as tender may be sold under our logo. We marketed the meat as Gippsland Natural.

Quality assurance of this nature does not come easily. Each link in the Gippsland Natural food chain – farmer, abattoir, retailer – is required to be MSA licensed. This has required considerable education and training at each level, as well as constant internal and external compliance audits. We have also implemented cutting edge technology in our quest to produce only top quality meat. DNA testing is used to “track” any meat that fails to meet the MSA's stringent tests, to determine the reasons for the lack of quality. This innovation alone has produced considerable cost benefits for all of our members and the industry as a whole.

Buoyed by our success in creating Gippsland Natural, we began to explore other market opportunities. Aware of the growing trend towards organic food, we explored ways to capitalize on the natural conditions enjoyed by our own cattle. Coincidentally, MLA was looking for producer groups to closely examine the application of Environmental Management Systems (EMS) within the grazing industry. Suddenly, a new opportunity - the creation of another niche product underpinned by both an EMS *and* our quality guarantee – was within reach.

Development of a sustainable EMS for beef producers began in 2000, looking at a range of issues including biodiversity, water catchment, erosion, chemical usage and waste disposal. Within two years, a world class EMS giving producers the tools to assess and manage environmental risks within a broader business plan, emerged.

Our EMS has been certified as compliant with ISO 14001:2004, aligns with both the Cattlecare and Flockcare quality assurance programs, and has been used as the basis for a number of other EMS throughout the country. Importantly for us, it has been

implemented by a number of producers within the region – and it is these producers who are responsible for the quality meat sold under the Eviromeat brand.

With approximately 60 farmers involved in both brands, we play a unique role in the Gippsland economy. We use local businesses in every step of production. Our commitment to education and training is renowned, as is our ability to work closely with government, universities and industry to promote and improve both our business and the Gippsland food industry.

Gippsland Natural and Enviromeat are both products of change.

We have met – and continue to meet! – many barriers in our quest to change farming, business and retailing practices. In most cases, these barriers have resulted from a lack of knowledge or understanding, and have been overcome by a firm commitment to education, training and communication.

Every Gippsland Natural producer is encouraged to watch their meat being assessed, to understand firsthand the quality attributes of their cattle. DNA tracking, meat quality days, case studies and follow up visits to farms where meat has failed to grade, have helped producers improve the quality of their meat.

We have also arranged a variety of activities, including tours to innovative retail outlets, to help our members understand customer needs and concerns. Similarly, we have arranged farm tours for retailers to give them an understanding of the conditions under which our meat is produced.

Developing our own EMS was a more difficult task. A small group of our members took up the challenge, but was faced with a complex web of overlapping and even contradictory legislative requirements. Realising that any EMS needed to be simple and easily implemented, we co-funded (with DPI) the development of a set of guidelines to summarize and explain the legal obligations associated with an EMS. These guidelines are a useful tool for any Australian producer wishing to implement an EMS.

By the time our EMS was finalized, our pilot members were all convinced of its value as both a business management and marketing tool. Persuading *other* farmers of its value, however, was another matter! We were asking them to critically review and perhaps change practices that had been in place for many years, and to expend time and money in doing so. Fortunately we had the support of several bodies, including the Natural Heritage Trust, MLA, Landcare, Department of Primary Industries, the Department of Sustainability & Environment and the South Gippsland Shire Council, to help coordinate programs to inform producers of the advantages of an EMS, and to then give them the tools and support to implement and maintain an EMS.

We began introducing the EMS to a broad audience of producers in 2002 with press releases, forums and workshops, and have been proactive on the training and education

front ever since. All of our staff are fully trained in all aspects of the EMS, and we run a wide range of programs for producers, including workshops, training days and field days. We regard ongoing support, training and communication as essential, and encourage our members to share their EMS experiences – both good and bad – to assist other producers in their own farm management.

As farmers, we are aware that an EMS must be simple, cost-effective and user friendly, and provide clear cost benefits to the producer implementing it. For these reasons, we continually monitor the outcomes of the EMS to ensure that it remains up-to-date, relevant and advantageous to our members.

Researching the need for innovation

European trends have been revealing for some time a growing trend by consumers towards food that is safe, healthy and produced using “environmentally friendly” methods. We had also noticed the success some producers – notably the wine industry – were having in promoting regional brands.

Initially, we accessed the results of internationally and nationally conducted consumer surveys to determine consumer demand, and then conducted our own market surveys. We concluded that while Australian consumers *are* concerned about the environment and the treatment of livestock, their primary concerns are that their meat is safe and of a high quality. Hence, we concluded that developing a system to ensure that our meat carries the MSA quality guarantee was critical to the success of our business.

In considering the application of an EMS to our business, we researched the experience of Red Tip Eco-bananas. This Queensland business has created a recognisable brand from an otherwise homogenous product, relying on its environmentally friendly production methods to distinguish its bananas from others in the market. We were fortunate when a representative from Red Tip Eco-bananas came to speak to us about their business structure. Their experiences helped shape the way in which we developed the Enviromeat brand.

More recently, we have been conducting consumer surveys at the farmers’ markets where some of our meat is being sold, to gauge consumer response to our meat. The feedback has been extremely positive with many repeat customers. We have also learnt that consumers want information and clear, concise food labeling to assist them in their purchasing decisions.

In promoting our products, we have focused on three main aspects:

- Tenderness
- Health benefits
- Environmental and animal friendly practices.

Initially we launched our products at select retailers in the Gippsland region. In Melbourne, we have targeted innovative retail outlets selling quality niche products, and

have begun a marketing campaign informing consumers about the benefits of buying our meat.

Enviromeat Outlets

Rendinas Butchery

253b Belmore Road, Balwyn, Victoria, 3104

Phone: 03 9857 6669

Glenferrie Gourmet Meats

Glenferrie Road

Hillies Meats (From November 2007)

119 Marine Parade, San Remo, Victoria, 3925

Phone: 03 5678 5489 www.hilliesmeatandproduce.com.au

Pie In The Sky

43 Olinda-Monbulk Road, Olinda, Victoria, 3788

Phone: 03 9751 2128

IGA – Cowes (From November 2007)

161 Thompsaon Ave, Cowes

IGA - Newhaven(From November 2007)

8 - 10 Forrest Ave, Newhaven

Gippsland Natural Outlets:

Ashburton	Ashburton Meats, 235 High street road, 98858118
Belgrave South	Greg's Tender Joint, 150 Colby Drive, 9754 1711
Clifton Hill	AUR Clifton Hill, 292 Queens Parade, 94817566
Foster	Foster Butchery, John Davies, 56822410
Inverloch	AUR Supermarket, Domenic Brusamarello, 56741482
Maribyrnong	Foodworks High Point Shopping Centre, 9318 3600
Tarwin Lower	B &K Turner's Family Butcher, 56635237
Tooradin	TJ Gourmet Meats, Terry Barlow, 59983264

Our two niche brands are the end result of a series of achievements – achievements that have been driven by innovation.

Our key achievement has been the development of our quality assurance program, and seeing our producers receive top dollar for their beef. Our second achievement has been the development of a world class EMS, and encouraging both producers and consumers to consider the environmental impact of their decisions. We are confident that this will lead to better environmental management in all areas of food production.

But there have been other, less obvious, achievements as well. In developing our innovations we have had to work closely with our members, government departments, researchers, industry bodies and business. We have seen a spirit of cooperation and collaboration emerge that has translated into improvements in our business and the Gippsland economy.

We have also seen a dramatic increase in the level of knowledge at all levels of the production chain, and a willingness to share that knowledge.

Finally, we are creating a product which is giving people satisfaction, as well as being good for both them and the environment. Surely there can be no better result than that!