

## Pontiacs bound for Fiji

By Photo and Editorial by Kristen Frost The Land  
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John Bensley with his granddaughters Charlie and Chloe Bensley. Photo by Kristen Frost, The Land

GROWING Pontiac potatoes is nothing new for fourth generation potato grower, Mr Troy Bensley and his family, but shipping them off to Fiji is something they haven't ventured into before.

Situated at Crookwell in the Southern Tablelands, Mr Bensley runs Stillbrook Potato and Pastoral Company in partnership with his parents, John and Sandra and wife, Nicola.

Together they run a 100 hectare mixed farming operation of certified seed potatoes along with a Poll Merino stud and 500 head Merino ewes.

Potatoes are the mainstay for the family, producing 30 tonne of potatoes to the hectare annually, depending on the season.

Just over a month ago they received an email from a research company in Fiji with a request to fill a large order of Pontiac potatoes to be shipped over in 20 kilogram bags.

"We received an email from Mr Patrick McGreesh, on behalf of Sigatoka Research Station in Fiji, to see if we grew the Pontiac variety and if we did, could we supply them with an order," Mr Bensley said.

"It was just fortunate that we were able to fill the 10 tonne order."

But accommodating the order is no mean feat, equating to 500 bags in total, having to pack the potatoes into 20 kilogram bags is time consuming and labour intensive.

"We had to think carefully about taking up the request," Mr Bensley said.

“These sorts of orders are labour intensive so you have to weigh up if it’s worth it.”

“We used to ship to Norfolk Island, only giving that away two or three years ago because of the smaller orders being more labour exhaustive.”

“It’s like any business; you have to weigh up your input and costs all of the time.”

With only four potato farmers remaining in the region, the Bensley’s work ethics are steadfast, stemming from Mr Bensley’s grandfather, Max and his three brothers, who would manually dig up over 20 hectares of potatoes a year with a fork.

These days, machinery has alleviated some of the manual work, but growing potatoes still requires long, dedicated hours often starting at day break and not finishing until well into the evening.

The family grows about five varieties of potatoes with Sebago, Atlantic and Carisma their main three, along with Pontiac and Virginia Rose grown in a lesser capacity.

Their spuds are shipped off to South Australia, Atherton Tablelands, Riverina, Bundaberg, Maitland, Robertson and Dorrigo as well as smaller clients situated in Western Sydney.

Growing seed potatoes means changing paddocks every year due to the five year rotational rule.

Mr Bensley said because of the climate in Crookwell and its isolation, it is a perfect area to grow potatoes and avoid disease.

When asked if this was going to be an ongoing contract, Mr Bensley said he couldn’t say for certain.

“Nothing has been said that it will be an ongoing contract,” Mr Bensley said.

“I think it is just a case of ‘seeing how it goes.’”

“Maybe Fiji would like to grow seed potatoes themselves, but I don’t think their climate will allow them to farm potatoes at a sustainable level.

In 2010 potato farming was introduced to Fiji through the Import Substitution in a bid to reduce the country’s potato imports.

According to the agriculture’s ministry plan, the cultivation of potatoes in Fiji would reduce the importation of the tuber of \$5.3 million annually, equivalent to growing nearly 450 hectares of potatoes.

But principal Agricultural Officer, Western Division, Mr Sugrim Chand, said Fiji will always have to import potatoes and will never be self-sufficient.

He said at best, imports could be reduced by as much as one third by the Import Substitution Program implemented by the government.

“We are very seasonal and can only grow one crop a year,” Mr Chand said.

“Because of this we will never be able to total fulfil the local market demand.”

Fiji imports up to 18,000 tonnes of potatoes annually at a total cost of about \$19m.