

## 5 minutes with Mic Fels, Growth Awards Productivity Winner

Broadacre  
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Michael Fels, 2016 Growth Awards Winner. Source: The Weekly Times.

*Each month in Cereals News, we will be showcasing the outstanding work that our Growth Awards Winners are achieving out in the field. This month we talk to 2016 winner in the Productivity category, Michael (Mic) Fels, The owner/manager of Halcyon Downs, Esperance, WA.*

Mic Fels sets a benchmark in his region for productivity and profitability, and says to get there he "failed fast".

After completing his degree in Mechanical Engineering and meeting his wife Marnie, also an engineer, Mic soon realised that the office environment wasn't for him. Before long, Mic's father was encouraging the young couple to buy their own property.

Starting out with no capital backing and little farming know how, the first 10 years were tough. Mic says that the pressure of never having enough funds in the early days trained them in ruthless cost management to make sure every dollar spent made more than a dollar in return. They also had to learn early from their own mistakes, which meant they worked out quickly how far to trust their gut. This involved a lot of trials, data and business analysis, to be able to closely monitor the results of different methods on their own property. Their analytical approach paid off, and within 10 years they had sold their first farm and bought a bigger farm in a better area, then going from strength to strength ever since.

The desire to optimise their input costs was the foundation for Mic's focus on collecting data wherever

it could be collected, so he could increase productivity while managing input costs.

His out of the box approach led to innovations such as the [Unstacker](#), a machine which collects grain more efficiently during harvest, and the [iPaddockYield](#) iPhone/iPad app which predicts yield according to the season, helping farmers make better targeted input decisions. Mic's first app, [iPaddockSpray](#), was initially developed to better manage the complex spraying operation on their farms, and is now used by farmers all over Australia.

As well as their own business, Mic is passionate about the future of Australian agriculture, and that is a prime motivator behind commercialising the technology they have developed to solve what they saw as the biggest issues on their own properties.

### **Mic, how do you think your work helps to overcome the challenges of modern farming?**

The biggest challenge Australian farmers face is constantly rising costs set against flat or declining grain prices. With profit margins so tight, every percent gain in yield, or reduction in cost, has to be chased, but it also has to lead to sustainable improvement.

My innovations in machinery and digital apps have all been about providing a solution for the issues that they have identified as limiting their potential. One of the big advantages for me and my wife, Marnie, in achieving scale with the business is that we can justify a significant on-farm R&D program. Commercialising those solutions means our business can hopefully invest further into R&D to continually improve productivity.

Alongside my work in agri-politics, advocacy and the iPaddock business, I have developed a strong following on social media, especially Twitter. Twitter has become a powerful medium for farmers to stay abreast of industry issues at a grassroots level, as well as seeing what solutions farmers and consumers are coming up with and looking for.

I believe that as agriculture advances and becomes more efficient the world is losing touch with how food is produced at scale. This disconnect between the farmers and the consumers is why agriculture faces some of the challenges it's experiencing today. This has resulted in the redirection of government funding away from critical supportive infrastructure such as connectivity and transport, and the undue influence that activist groups have gained over important national industry policy. This challenge motivates me to be active in industry discussion both in traditional and social media, as well as in agricultural advocacy.

### **What did winning a Growth Award and what will participating on the upcoming study tour mean to you?**

Some of my best decisions have been a direct result of leaving my hometown and learning from farmers from other parts of Australia and the world. I see the Syngenta Growth Awards study tour as a unique opportunity to glean knowledge from some of the world's best, especially regarding soil drainage. This season a large area of my canola crop was effectively written off due to waterlogging. I'd say it was the worst it has been in 23 years. I want to learn from farmers who routinely operate in high rainfall conditions and see how I can adapt those lessons into the Australian context.

I'm also hoping to use this unique opportunity to meet leading technology innovators from Syngenta, as well as others at the forefront of agtech development, to discuss future opportunities and potential innovative partnerships.

## **How have your productivity goals influenced your farming practices?**

I'm focused on productivity because it is directly related to my bottom line and long-term business sustainability. I see the health of my soils as the heart of all productivity, and I have adopted and adapted practices which nurture healthy soils within our chemical dependent farming system. Identifying unique production zones, and treating them according to their realistic productive potential is also central to our current farming system. The Three Springs property has very distinct production zones, which I have broken into high yield; good yield; moderate yield and low yield, and all major inputs are varied using VRT technology to optimise the profit from every zone.

To increase the productivity and long-term sustainability, I use a unique "stacked" rotation (I discovered it from a US guest speaker at a no-till conference) with narrow row spacings and full stubble retention. This rotation ensures that there is a long break between crop types, which effectively cleans out soil and plant pathogens. I also lived with herbicide resistance almost since starting farming, and Integrated Weed Management strategies such as chaff lining at harvest and strategic rotation of chemistries is paying off with healthy crops and chemical resistance held at bay.

***Mic will join the Growth Awards Study Tour of the UK and Europe in July this year.***

Learn more about the Growth Awards and read the profiles of other winners [here](#).

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