



Photo DAVID HOGAN

**ABOVE LEFT** Michael and Louise Hogan harvest organic avocados covered by an environmental management system (EMS) guarantee.



Photo KENRICK RILEY

**ABOVE RIGHT** Michael Hogan, Miloudamat Farm, Alstonville, NSW, with quality avocados being loaded for market.

# Green farm achieves environmental badge of honour

By KENRICK RILEY

**A** DESIRE TO GIVE HIS AVOCADO BUYERS A guarantee on his farm's sustainability has resulted in Michael Hogan becoming one of the first NSW Northern Rivers farmers certified under the new category of environmental management system (EMS).

The Miloudamat avocado farm at Alstonville is already accredited

A Grade Organic and has FreshCare fruit handling approval. But the EMS recognition via Western Australia's BestFarms process is a significant feather in Michael's cap.

A local, full-time public servant, Michael bought the 10-acre horse paddock in 1999 with his wife Louise and their sons David and Matthew as a place to grow a few avocados on and retire to later. But he soon immersed himself in farming philosophy and started looking seriously at building a viable farm to run post-retirement.

And the farm is seriously 'green'. Organic certification ensures the avocados are pure. FreshCare ensures the fruit is handled safely. But BestFarms EMS was the badge that proved the ecological safety of the farm.

"The community wants farmers to be environmentally friendly," Michael says. "They want to know the land will be there for the future. The BestFarms EMS certificate tells them we are improving our farm's environment and we are not putting silt into the rivers."

Organic and FreshCare programs didn't conduct environmental audits to assess levels of run-off, erosion or soil compaction so Michael undertook a two-day BestFarms course in September 2007, run by the Northern Rivers Catchment Management Authority.

One of the key factors in the BestFarms process requires Michael to extensively document a list of possible risks to farm sustainability and develop detailed plans for addressing those risks – without disturbing the farm environment.

Most farmers would balk at another tonne of paperwork just to justify what they do but a lifetime in the public service has made Michael immune to documents and red tape. He has absorbed a huge amount of knowledge in the 10

years since buying the farm. Much has come from farm visits via an active local LandCare group, along with associated projects on worms, soil and pests, but he also undertook Organic Certification with ACO in 1999 (A Grade by 2002) and the FreshCare course through TAFE in 2002 and completed the recent BestFarms EMS study.

"I'm always keen to learn. I want to develop a better farm and there is a wealth of knowledge out there to access," Michael says. He is also a keen learner from walking his own farm. "I look at the trees, the mulch, the soil, the water sensor, just to see what is happening."

Both their sons have now left home – and Michael and Louise still work full-time off-farm – so the June-to-November harvest is limited to what they can happily cope with on weekends. But that still involves the pair picking 250 trays (about 2.5 tonnes) of Hass and Lamb Hass avocados and hand-grading and packing them for market, all in 12-hour days.

Any avocados merely cosmetically damaged are retained for an 'honesty box' out on the road where locals buy them, often leaving lovely notes about the fruit's flavour and quality.

Reject fruit is tipped into large worm-farm bins. After flushing with water, the worm juice is used

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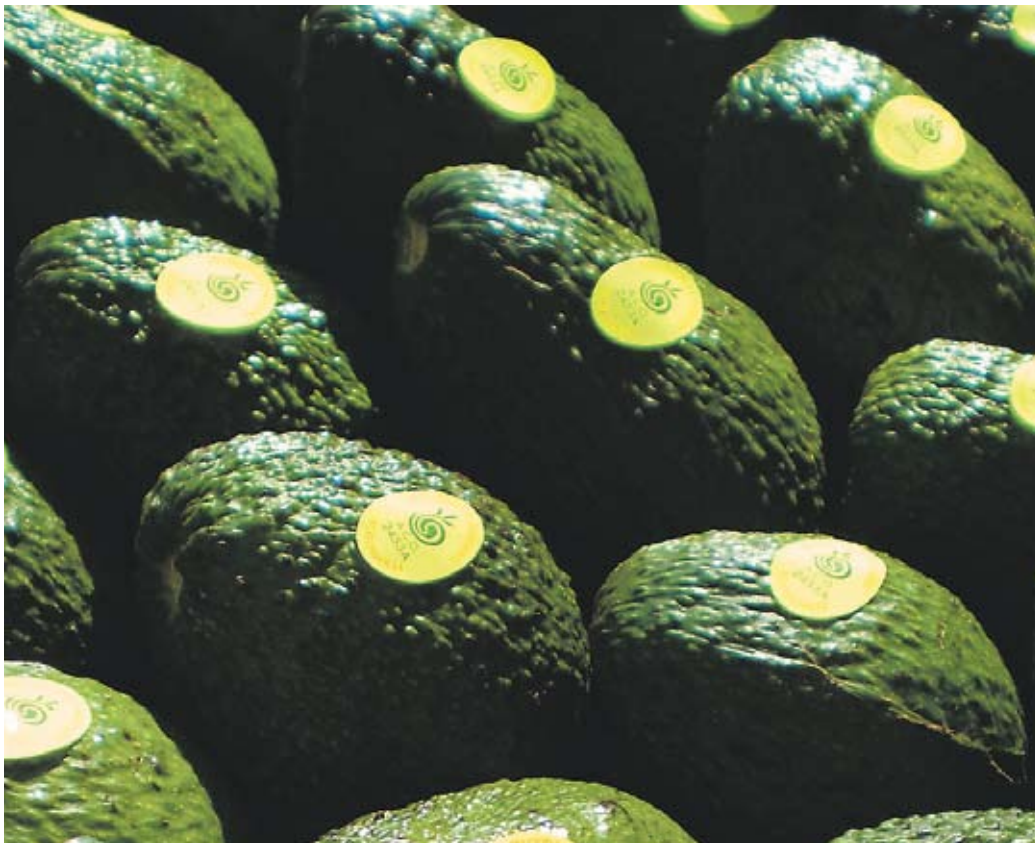


Photo KENRICK RILEY

Quality fruit from the Miloudamat Avocado Farm, Alstonville, NSW.

on the orchard. A seaweed solution is also fed out. However, Michael applies only a little at a time – usually about a third of the recommended rate. When worm castings


are dry they are put back out with a fertiliser spreader. He also brews bacterial and fungal compost teas adding molasses, yoghurt and his “secret mix of herbs and spices”.

To control pests Michael buys in wasps and lacewings from Queensland and releases them over an eight-week period after fruit set. However, he is happy to accept a certain percentage of damage to help achieve a happy medium.

After 10 years the older trees are ready to be pruned. Michael is staggering the job so he won't lose all his crop from one year of pruning. Exposed trunks are then painted white to limit sunburn. In future, trees will be kept to three to four metres for ease of picking and to improve fruit quality – rather than quantity.

Quality is a passion for Michael. “The general market wants perfection anyway. But I am very rigid about putting only high-quality avocados out for sale. It doesn't necessarily bring you any more money but there is self-satisfaction, the pride in the product.”


Now, just two years away from retirement, Michael says his next life will be spent full-time improving the farm and taking pride in supplying an ever increasing quality product – happy in the knowledge the farm will be left much better than he found it. ☺



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