



*Preparing for the road ahead.*

## Rural Succession Services

PMB 23, Mt Gambier, SA 5291  
PO Box 12358, Melbourne, Vic 8006  
Ph: 0403 534 873 E: [brett@successionservices.com](mailto:brett@successionservices.com)

Rural Succession Services was born from the realisation that the principal, Brett Hills was able to offer unique insights and assistance to farmers working through issues of succession. A lifetime on the land followed by 10 years as a Chartered Accountant and the personal experience of devising a family farm succession plan was the catalyst to its development.

What began as a realisation soon became reality as he combined passions and professional interests into Rural Succession Services, a business designed to provide family farms and businesses with:

- a clear path to their future
- assistance in negotiating the complex maze of lawyers, accountants and other professionals in this area;
- real experience and practical advice.

The process of Family Farm Succession is a unique farming experience. Few other farming exercises so complexly involve family, land, emotions and wealth. It is critical therefore that the process is addressed professionally yet sensitively.

Rural Succession Services is uniquely able to assist in this process.

The principal, Brett Hills, was raised on “Summer Hill” a sheep and cattle property in the lower South East of South Australia. He graduated from Deakin University with a degree in Accounting and Commerce and followed the natural career path into Business Accounting and Taxation. While never losing touch with the family farm he held numerous financial positions in Australia, the United Kingdom and the European Union over the following decade.

In 2003 he faced his own challenge as a son, brother and partner in his own family farm. The questions were raised.

“Who will take over the farm?”  
“How will the parents retire?”  
“Where will all the money come from?”

In attempting to answer these questions the family began their own Succession Planning process with amazing results. From an uncertain and clouded future Brett and his family found a clear and concise pathway to their Family Farm Succession and a brighter future for everyone.

Inspired by these results it was then that Brett realised that his skills could be applied in assisting other Australian farmers through their own Succession Planning. He began Family Meeting Facilitation training and subsequently further enhanced his skills to develop succession plans unique to each family and farming situation.

Through a love of the land, professional education and personal experience Brett Hills and Rural Succession Services have developed pathways to the future for Australian farming and are keen to assist farms and families in their own Succession Plan.

## Professional Credentials

Brett's qualification as a Chartered Accountant and admittance to the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Australia in 1997 was testament to his professional capacity in the accounting discipline. Together with his Bachelor of Commerce degree he was well placed to undertake the several Accounting and Financial positions he held Australia, the United Kingdom and the European Union during the next decade.

While working in Australia for Day Neilson, Brett followed his natural instincts into Farm Accounting. He worked for a number of rural clients throughout Victoria advising on taxation, business management and superannuation. Brett's understanding of not only the financial issues but also the on-farm circumstances allowed him to form strong relationships with clients built on trust, knowledge and understanding.

While overseas Brett held the position of Financial Director with the English and Swiss company Brookshaw Stuart International. The exposure to the European way of business and culture of the people helped him see beyond the importance of the facts and figures into what made people work together. His experience from years spent there broadened his outlook past the numbers.

While based in Melbourne at the turn of the millennium, Brett took a role as the Financial Accountant for Advance Petroleum and headed up the finance team. Brett's interpersonal skills and ability to see through the day to day issues resulted in many improvements to the financial systems of the company and the quality of information provided to management and the board.

The varied and diverse roles Brett has held throughout the world provided him with a continuing education platform that lasted over 10 years. He felt in early 2004 that the time was right for him to take these skills to the rural community and so began Rural Succession Services.



## **Succession Planning**

When faced with his own family farm Succession Planning issues Brett immediately saw that the usual farm communication techniques of sitting around the kitchen table or talking over family gatherings were not working. Personally experiencing the frustration, pain and suffering this was causing to all the family prompted Brett to call a Facilitated Family Business Meeting. Although the idea seemed foreign to some family members a meeting was eventually held in the boardroom of an accounting office with a professional facilitator in the chair.

The process followed that day together with the amazing results on both the family and the farm made Brett realise that his skills could be utilised helping other families work through their own process. He undertook professional facilitation training and began assisting other family's meetings with accounting advice and facilitation to their communication.

“At the end of the day a family has to decide together what is best for them. As a facilitator it is important to remember that you are the chauffer not the driver”  
“Brett Hills”

In starting his own business Brett was contacted by Rural Industries Skills Training (RIST) to prepare Succession Planning workshops. RIST were looking for someone who understood not only the farming and family issues involved in Succession Planning but who also had a strong grasp on the financial aspects. In response to this Brett prepared and delivered “Planning for Farm Succession”, a one day Succession Planning workshop which has received excellent reviews from all participants.

In a continuing association with RIST Brett is now a specialist presenter, working together with the institution on various succession based seminars and courses.



## Rural Profile

Brett was raised on the family sheep and cattle property near Mt Gambier, South Australia. As the 5<sup>th</sup> generation on the family property he was born into an affinity with the land and all it had to offer. In personally experiencing the trials and tribulations of farming over the years he developed an open mindset he has taken into the world of business and in particular Succession Planning.

Brett not only understands the financial issues faced when running a farm business.

What are the best investment strategies?  
 What are the options for retirement?  
 How do you finance or refinance your succession?  
 Where are the tax advantages?

But he has also seen how these questions tie in with the financial capabilities and opportunities of each particular farm.

In 2001 Brett demonstrated his own commitment to his family and farm by becoming a financial and active partner. By combining their resources and skills the family was able to purchase additional grazing land and expand their business. Currently running a beef breeding and fattening operation with links to direct markets he has ensured he has kept abreast of real time issues for farmers and the best ways to address them. Further experiencing the peaks and troughs of wool and prime lamb over the past two decades has given Brett and appreciation for risk minimisation and diversification.

Apart from business and farming the other passion in Brett's life is horses. An accomplished rider from an early age, Brett now enjoys breaking and working with young horses bringing them to complete level of trust and understanding before putting them to work on the farm or in competition.

“Working with horses has parallels with working with people. For the best results you have to understand them, work with them, and return trust to them”

“Brett Hills”

Brett is proud of the fact that his family have been able to work through their own Succession Plan and keep the 5 generations and 128 years of history alive for future generations to follow.



## **Frequently Asked Questions**

### ***“Where is Rural Succession Services based?”***

Rural Succession Services has bases in Melbourne and Mt Gambier which ensures that services can be provided to a wide area and interstate travel can be easily undertaken.

### ***“What is the process followed when people approach you with a succession planning issue?”***

The same process is followed when facilitating all family meetings. A neutral venue is suggested and all family members and partners are asked to attend for the entire day. The family accountant is requested to be present to answer specific financial questions regarding the farm. Minutes of the meeting and agreements are always provided to all family members.

### ***“What are the most common issues that are dealt with at the first Succession Planning Meeting?”***

Quite often the first issue to deal with is are there any children who wish to carry on the family farm after the retirement of the parents. Once this is established the following issues often come to the fore. When will the parents retire? How and when will the assets be distributed between the children? How and when is the transfer of management going to take place? What tax issues have to be considered during transferring and how are financial arrangements going to be protected going forward?”

### ***“How do we protect the family farm from the circumstances of relationship breakdown and divorce?”***

Binding Financial Agreements are increasingly being used to assist in the division of assets should a relationship breakdown. The Family Law Act is now recognising that Binding Financial Agreements will largely determine how assets will be distributed in such case.

### ***“How do we compensate one child for returning to the farm and working for minimal wages prior to taking over the farm. Whilst at the same time being fair to all children?”***

There are several ways to reward returning children. They can take a share in the business, be gifted livestock or plant, or take land to the value of forgone wages. One way to ascertain the market value of such wages is to base it on the same methodology as Centrelink who use an economically calculated procedure to determine the value of land being gifted under the “Forgone Wages” gifting policy.