



HD **A wild ride**

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From the scorching dry to floods aplenty, from policy wins to political mayhem and the worst dairy crisis in decades, The Weekly Times was there to tell the story

JANUARY 27 Dairy was making front page news from the get-go in 2016, but it wasn't the milk in the country causing problems — it was the milk leaving it. Booming infant milk formula exports to China were squeezing out airfreight exports of perishable fruits and vegetables. It caused headaches for growers wanting to export their produce quickly to key Asian markets.

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FEBRUARY 17 After several years covering the story, The Weekly Times revealed plans were afoot to make rollover protection for quad bikes effectively mandatory in Victoria. WorkSafe Victoria tightened quad bike rules, banning them from workplaces unless fitted with the appropriate rollover protection.

MARCH 16 The Murray River was gripped by a toxic blue-green algae outbreak, causing havoc for towns the length of the river, especially with an early Easter this year. Agriculture, tourism and town water supplies were all affected, and the final red alerts on the river were not lifted until June.

APRIL 13 Football took centre stage with Geelong and Essendon playing in the AFL's first Country Game, highlighting the contribution of rural and regional Australia to the nation and football. A highlight of the edition was the selection of Cats and Bombers teams from their best-ever country players.

APRIL 20 Farmers were still looking to the skies waiting for the season to break in late April, after a generally drier February and March. But that did not stop optimistic farmers sowing thousands of hectares, with wetter than average La Nina conditions forecast for later in the year.

APRIL 27 A Weekly Times investigation found tens of millions of hectares of Australian farmland was owned by overseas interests, with the potential sale of S Kidman & Co to a China-backed consortium underway. The analysis showed a growing list of nationalities had invested in Australian farms in recent years.

MAY 4 Murray Goulburn milk suppliers were suddenly facing huge debts when the company slashed its milk price — the start of what was arguably the biggest story of the year. The day after this edition, Australia's second-largest milk processor, Fonterra, followed suit, reducing its farmgate price for the season to \$5.15/kg of milk solids.

JUNE 8 Premier Daniel Andrews' hold on Victoria's top job was under threat with the Country Fire Authority-United Firefighters Union dispute in full swing. The Premier was also plagued by transport woes after the unexpected cancelling of rail services to rural Victoria due to wheel wear and track design on V/Line trains.

JUNE 22 Some farmers were rejoicing a wet start to winter but others were left cursing as their freshly planted winter crops were washed away.

AUGUST 3 There were renewed calls for water recovery targets in the north of the Murray Darling Basin to be lowered as the socio-economic impact was revealed — up to 35 per cent of agricultural jobs had evaporated from communities in the basin's upper reaches.

AUGUST 24 Victoria will become the first state in Australia to implement compulsory electronic sheep identification tags, Agriculture Minister Jaala Pulford announced in August.

SEPTEMBER 21 An Australian worker would have to earn \$211,632 to be taxed at the rate being proposed for backpackers in a botched proposal that threatened this year's harvest of Australia's horticulture crop. The backpacker tax debate ran to the 11th hour, finally settling at 13 per cent.

OCTOBER 19 The Federal Government's argument that its dairy concessional loans should be exclusive to Murray Goulburn and Fonterra suppliers was beginning to unravel as MG started losing suppliers. By the end of the year, they would lose more than 350 million litres in supplied milk.

NOVEMBER 16 Geelong City Council's decision to close its saleyards threatened to put biosecurity at risk and force sales of livestock on to unregulated markets such as eBay. The council quickly back-flipped on the decision, announcing it would spend \$400,000 to upgrade the yards which had been shut down in August due to safety concerns.

DECEMBER 7 A record grain crop was predicted for Australian growers, with the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences forecasting a mammoth winter crop of 52.4 million tonnes — a 15 per cent jump on the previous record of 45.7 million tonnes, set in 2011-12.

"I am confident we can do this without placing any additional cost burden on farmers." Agriculture Minister Jaala Pulford on unveiling a mandatory electronic ID program for sheep, August 31.

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