

Organics take root in hostile territory

By Daniel Lewis, Regional Reporter

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It's an organic thing ... Garry Hannigan back in Broken Hill after returning from Sydney, where he received his award.
Photo: Gavin Schmidt

Garry Hannigan's business card lists him as a bush and comedy poet - "poems written on request" - but his day job as an outback organic farmer is not something he does for laughs. Once the preserve of weekend warriors and alternative lifestylers in the lush coastal regions, organic farming has spread to the conservative and arid backblocks of the far west.

Mr Hannigan's 48,600-hectare Churinga Station, east of Broken Hill, became an organic farm last year after a certification process that took nearly three years.

Certified farms use no synthetic chemicals, fertilisers or genetically modified organisms. If he had not gone down the organic path, Mr Hannigan, 41, reckons he would be struggling. Churinga Station, drawn by his grandfather in a soldier-settler lottery in 1950, has done it tough since the ebb of the wool boom.

Mr Hannigan also used to rely heavily on the live sheep trade to the Middle East, which floundered last year after thousands of animals died at sea.

He diversified into arid-friendly Damara-Wiltshire cross lambs for the domestic organic meat market because "I could see [the live sheep trade] was in trouble".

Now Mr Hannigan says he is making more money while stocking his land more conservatively, which is better for the environment and surviving droughts.

For his efforts, he won the inaugural \$10,000 NSW Farmer of the Year Award this week. The award, run by the Department of Primary Industries and the NSW Farmers Association, rewards sustainability and profitability.

Mr Hannigan said that only a handful of other properties in the far west are organic, but about 30 others have expressed an interest.

"As soon as they realise you are making more money than them they become interested," he said.

Mr Hannigan is also involved in a pilot conservation project where he is paid for the next five years for fencing off and destocking about 10 per cent of his vast property to help conserve the fragile natural landscape.

Other drought-proofing measures include harvesting wild goats and being licensed to supply native timber to the craft market.

The Biological Farmers of Australia 2003 report put the number of organic farmers at 2100 and growing fast

Australia already has more land certified organic than the rest of the world combined.

For Sydneysiders, the ultimate proof of the industry's growth is the weekly Paddy's Organic Market at Flemington each Friday.