

18 FEB 1997

-- Industry

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NEWS

Local tobacco making a comeback



The Dovedale tobacco team holding the dried product. From left Shirley Burnett, Kevin Burnett, Robert Hodgkinson and Ross Golding.

by Ruth Whittaker

"I've been growing tobacco since I was 15. It's in my blood, all I know and I love it."

Kevin and Shirley Burnett's farm at Dovedale has known only tobacco since about 1933, when Kevin's grandfather, William Burnett started growing it followed by his father, Percy.

Kevin said "When Rothman's shut down, there was only one thing I could do - grow it on my own."

He has done just that and now after 12 hard months of getting all the details worked out, the new product is on the market.

The Dovedale business is the only one in New Zealand licensed to grow and dispose of tobacco.

Kevin said he left school when he was 14 and when he was 15 his father gave him a quota contract of his own. He had 35 hectares to grow on, most of

it covered in scrub and blackberry, with one paddock which has now been used for tobacco for 50 years.

He said at one stage he almost went bankrupt when frost damaged the crop two years running. "But I still stuck to growing it."

Over the years Kevin has seen many changes in the industry. He said he remembers when 18 people were employed on the farm, nine of them working in the fields picking by hand and nine working in the shed.

Kevin said modern machinery such as picking machines and new kilns cut the number of workers in half.

He said it used to take a week to grade the tobacco for sale in comparison to a mere two to three hours now.

Kevin said irrigation played a big part in the output of tobacco "Be-

fore we got irrigation we really struggled."

He said he has also gone through company changes, at first growing for Phillip Morris, then when it closed its doors, transferring to WD and HO Wills.

Kevin said when that company shut down it really knocked the stuffing out of him. To get back into the industry he leased about 14 acres of land in Motueka with a Rothmans quota on it. He then grew on that land as well as on the Dovedale farm.

"The reason was to split the risk factor from frost, it was to cover my tail."

When Rothman's closed down, Kevin said it wasn't such a shock, but he was very disappointed and didn't know what to do next.

He said "I had no income so I went on the unemployment benefit

until I decided to get this business going."

Kevin and Shirley employ two people in their cottage industry, Robert Hodgkinson who is the marketing manager and Ross Golding who works in the shed.

Kevin said they spent a lot of time over the packaging which was designed by Ralph Stringer.

He said the intention is to try and get it into every outlet in the Nelson area and they would like to take it nationwide and eventually export it.

Kevin said they also intend promoting it as a tourist attraction because of its uniqueness in New Zealand.

He said as the business expands they hope to include other local growers in the business.

Kevin said the business has the potential to employ many people in the long run.