

Nature-based solutions at its core

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The Bell family of Criffel Station in Wānaka is developing a future-focused farm with diversification and integration of nature based solutions throughout the operations. Located seven kilometres from Wānaka township, the farm runs a commercial deer farm while simultaneously operating tourism ventures and its newest enterprise, Dusk Hedges.

“We’re a commercial farm and within those boundaries it’s about how can we integrate ecosystem services and care of the environment and people into our business,” says Dr Amanda (Mandy) Bell who owns the farm with husband Jerry. Dusk Hedges, which started five years ago from a concept developed by the couple's son, is a specialist nursery growing mature hedges specifically bred to thrive in Central Otago's unique climate, selling them by the metre to the general public, landscapers and developers.

“We start selling this year and next year we’ll be at full production,” explains Mandy. The nursery, situated within Criffel Station, offers a range including Prunus Lusitanica Portuguese Laurel, Photinia 'Red Robin', Pittosporum Tenuifolium, Griselinia Littoralis and Elaeagnus x Ebbingei. The business is working toward being carbon-zero, with every hedge planted also helping to support biodiversity. Dusk Hedges is just one element of the station's diversified approach. Crossfire, located at Criffel Junction, has been operational for over 10 years, offering claybird shooting, archery, rifle range, mini golf and driving range facilities. The station also offers curated behind-the-farm-gate experiences including taste journeys with guided foraging, learning experiences focused on sustainable farming practices and high country exploration across the property's dramatic landscapes.

The Bell family, custodians of the land since the 1960s when Jerry’s parents Hector and Joan established the farm. Mandy and Jerry purchased the farm in 1993 and converted from a high country sheep station. The property comprises 350 hectares of finishing pastures on the flats and terraces, with 315 hectares irrigated, and 1,650 hectares of breeding hill blocks on steeper tussock country. It runs predominantly Eastern European red deer across three farming operations: hill breeding, venison finishing and a velveting operation utilising breeding values and DNA technology. The station's approach is guided by a long-term vision, operating with a 30-year farming business plan and an intergenerational perspective. This thinking is formalised through Criffel Futures, which focuses on ecosystem services, land use change, environmental care and functional food.

“Understanding who we are and our land, we take a long term view,” explains Mandy.

She acknowledges that the primary sector is in a short term up cycle but with an undercurrent of significant challenges including commodity cycles, processing overcapacities, environmental issues, and disruptive technologies such as production and use of bio-nutraceuticals.

“The world of food is constantly changing—both in what people eat and how they eat it,” explains Mandy. “As farmers, we have to take all of this into account and keep pace with the changes and the opportunities. While many tend to focus on just one

part of the picture, true sustainability for our businesses requires a holistic approach. We need to be proactive, shifting our mindset toward finding solutions and putting them into action.”