



Eighteen lucky years

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in a nutshell

After 18 years of being the face and soul of IREC Nell Snaidero has handed in the keys and is taking off with husband Nud to explore uncharted terrain of Australia and next year, to discover people and places across the northern hemisphere.

Nell Snaidero was the ideal person to run the Irrigation Research and Extension Committee when it was looking for a new secretary in 1989. She was highly skilled in secretarial responsibilities and bookkeeping, and had a broad and relevant range of experience from several years working for a colourful politician and the Rural Bank. What made her perfect for the job, was that Nell also came with first-hand and shared experience for the very people IREC seeks to serve – irrigators.

In July this year Nell retired from IREC after 18 years service. The occasion was marked with a dinner, where Nell's efforts and contribution were recounted and applauded by many people representing the diverse range of work that Nell's years with IREC entailed.

Mike Hedditch was the General Secretary of IREC for many of Nell's 18 years with the organisation. He recalls his time with Nell and IREC.

"When I joined RGA in 1987 the question was asked 'whether IREC had a future and whether RGA should continue providing secretariat services for IREC'. We made the right decision to continue supporting IREC and when Nell came on board a few years later the organisation had some of its best years in the modern era. IREC was a very active participant in the modernisation of R & D and the formation of statutory R & D Corporations. IREC was also involved in the water policy reform that ultimately led to the corporatisation and privatisation of the government run water delivery businesses," he said.

"The IREC Irrigated Farm Competition and the success it became was all Nell's doing as was the improvement in the funding and operation of the Tri-state Fruit Fly Campaign that is so critical to the MIA.

"Nell had such empathy for all irrigators, no matter whether they were rice growers, citrus growers, grape growers or vegetable growers. Despite the differences the commodity groups often had on issues, I recall Nell often saying that 'we had more in common than divided us'. I think it was this common ground that inspired Nell to do such a tremendous job at IREC on behalf of all irrigators. I was always amazed at the respect irrigators and bureaucrats had for Nell and this put IREC on very good terms with them all."

Deeply rooted in the MIA

On returning from the Second World War, Nell's father moved his family to Griffith to work for Jack Thompson at Hanwood. Nell was 18 months old at the time. After attending Griffith High School, Nell undertook secretarial studies at the technical college. On becoming qualified she worked for a short while at The Area News, and then spent about seven years at the Rural Bank.

"In those days the Rural Bank sent out all the water accounts, it ran a lot of agencies such as 'Assistance to Settlers' and 'Rural Assistance', because the bank was owned by the state," Nell said.

That experience, as it turned out in later years, was very valuable to Nell. Although brief, her next job also provided her with skills and knowledge that would be useful in later life.

"Just before I got married I went to work for Al Grasby as his electorate secretary. The work was very involved with everything that goes on in this area," she said.

Nell became fully entrenched in the irrigation industry of the region when she met and later married Rinaldo 'Nud' Snaidero.



Figure 1: Nell Snaidero retiring after 18 years at IREC



"I married a local lad – the son of a pioneering Italian farmer. We took over the family farm on Centofanti Road at Hanwood. We lived there for about eight years," Nell said.

"We then bought the farm at Whitton, which was a mixed farm. That was about 28 years ago and there weren't very many mixed farms around. When we went there we had canning peaches, citrus and a small acreage of grapes. As time went on and canneries disappeared, we eventually ended up with just grapes on the horticulture sections, and cattle and lucerne on the rest. We had high security water, as well some general security water.

"In most ways the mix of enterprises and water has been good. But there have been heartbreaking aspects to it too. I guess that is what has helped me understand what the people we've worked with at IREC go through – when you are going through it yourself!"

"After getting married, I was on the farm and raising five children for the next 15 years. I was very involved with Girl Guides through that time, and did all the 'mum' and 'school' things – I was secretary in the very early days of Neighbourhood House and I was on the Leeton committee for Healthy Harold – a life education program for schools. I was always involved in things like that, and of course children's sport."

Nell also worked on the farm and got to understand the workload and issues first-hand, as well as be part of innovation on farm, such as installing microjet irrigation in the 1980s.

Re-entering the workforce

For a range of reasons Nell started her off-farm working career again in the mid 1980s.

"I started with some part-time work with the Department of Agriculture at Yanco, and a little while later was recommended for the IREC job by the head of staff.

"I was very aware of IREC because we all got our *Farmers' Newsletter*, and because the Rural Bank was one of the instigators of IREC way back – so I had always known about IREC.



Figure 2: The 2006 Irrigated Farm Competition Committee

"I met with Mike Hedditch, they offered me the job on the spot and I've been here since 1989!

"The position was based at CSIRO in Griffith and I worked alongside all the CSIRO staff."

IREC in the irrigation community

In 18 years Nell has seen IREC change and evolve as different needs and issues arose for industries in the irrigation area.

"Over the years IREC has been the instigator of lots of things, such as the Rural Counselling Service, the Fruit Fly Committee and the MIA Vine Improvement Society. All those services that no-one else really took on because at the time there was no organisation equipped to deal with such things. The drainage subcommittee was a very very important subcommittee of IREC years ago, but it is no longer working because those drainage issues have been resolved gradually over the years," Nell said.

"In a lot of ways IREC has been a melting pot of ideas, and some things come out of it which IREC has been willing to get started, and then it goes off and runs itself. That has been an important function of IREC."

There are many facets of IREC that Nell is very proud to have been involved with. And given the fact that Nell was the only employee in the IREC office, she has had a hand in everything that has gone on for 18 years.

"I have been very proud to be involved with the Irrigated Farm Competition over the years. I think it is so important to show the general public, politicians and their advisors, and other farmers what good things are being done in the irrigation areas," Nell said.

"Having the ability to pick out the people who are doing really good things and showcase their farms is really important. I know that every winner over the years has had politicians and other people come to visit them, for quite some time after the presentations. The winners become a model, if you like, and that has happened every time. I think that is very satisfying that other people identify these people as achievers.



Figure 3: The Irrigated Farm Competition was a very rewarding part of the job for Nell, pictured here with Peter Draper in 2002



"The Farmers' Newsletter has always been a major activity of IREC and to see that go into colour was a great thing. It is such a good publication, and we are very proud of that.

"The Fruit Fly Subcommittee was one of our subcommittees that was really struggling because they couldn't do the secretarial work. Because I was a horticulturalist and knew how important their work was, I said I would help and it went from there. In the end it became a paid position one day a week.

"The Tri-State Committee has had some fantastic achievements the over the years. I guess one of the most satisfying things I can see happening now (and it has taken far too long) is that the Tri-State Committee's push for a National Fruit Fly Initiative is coming to fruition. Fruit fly is the most damaging pest of horticultural product, worldwide. And that's not just Queensland fruit fly that's Mediterranean fruit fly and the others. A national initiative will mean that all horticulturalists will contribute to control programs not just citrus growers in NSW, Victoria and South Australia."

IREC into the future

Having observed the changes in issues and demands for IREC's services in the past 18 years, Nell believes the fundamental need for IREC remains the same.

"It is a different era now to what it was when IREC was formed but I do think it is equally as important today for irrigators to have a place where they can come and talk over their problems, look for solutions, and have access to the researchers. That is as important today as it ever was," Nell said.

"At the end of the day most farmers just want to fix the problems. It can be quite simple and that is where IREC comes in – it can find the best people to do the research and then act as the conduit to back to the growers through *Farmers' Newsletter*, field days and other IREC activities."

Nell believes that IREC's more recent involvement with other research and development organisations in the wider region is a very important way for irrigators to improve their businesses and industry.

"I think IREC's leadership and involvement with the Irrigated Cropping Forum is very important, and I see that growing and becoming more and more important. It's a new focus and to evolve the ideas that irrigation land can produce a lot more grain will be useful. It is a whole new way forward," Nell said.

The Irrigated Cropping Forum is made up of the four groups representing irrigation cropping in the southern Murray-Darling Basin – IREC in the Murrumbidgee Valley, LIRAC in the Lachlan Valley, MRDC in the Murray Valley and VICC in northern Victoria.

"It is really really important for the four similar valleys work together. Irrigators need to stick together and work together to make things better and make irrigation better. There are so few irrigators yet we use 70% of the water, and it is so

important we get it right and it is vital that we produce as much as we can with as little water as we can," Nell said.

"We have to be profitable, we have to be productive, we have to be aware of our natural surroundings and we have to be water efficient. But if we are not profitable we can't be sustainable. A lot times we forget about that...that's probably the farmer in me coming out!"

Another activity that Nell considers of great importance now and in the future is promoting women within the irrigation industry.

"IREC has provided the secretariat to Riverina Agricultural Women – RAW. There are a lot of women on farms and married to farmers who have a lot of skills. We always had the feeling we needed to nurture those women to get them more involved in industry things. I have been known to say to some of the farmers that if they don't make use of their wives' or partners' skills then they are ignoring half of their resource base. Part of RAW's charter is to identify some of these women with potential, and educate and mentor them into industry roles. It is important to let women see that they can take a stronger role and use the skills they have got."

On reflection

When reflecting on her work with IREC Nell describes her experience as a privilege.

"I have just been so lucky to work with IREC and to have had the support in my work I've had. I feel as though I have been doing something worthwhile and contributed to the community, because if the farmers are successful, then the community is successful."

"Working with most of the researchers has been a joy – researchers from CSIRO and DPI. As a farmer, it is great knowing that there are scientists working hard to solve the problems we have. I don't think enough farmers know how much work is done for them. Because of IREC's location and its relationship with CSIRO, I have been able to put the farmers' point of view into the research discussion. And CSIRO has been such a rich resource for IREC activities – contributing to the *Farmers' Newsletter*, field days, seminars and being on the IREC Executive. It has been an intellectually stimulating place to work.

"It has been the ideal job for me. It used my skills and it was enjoyable – really enjoyable. I never had a major argument with anyone, which is pretty good over 18 years and I have done some really interesting things."

Nell and Nud have sold their farm at Whitton and are planning to travel for the next year or so. Immediately they will travel to visit their Queensland-based children at Brisbane, Mt Isa and Townsville. At the same time they will be road testing the motor home lifestyle, and if it proves successful, they might travel further around Australia. Next year they plan to travel overseas – Italy, France, United Kingdom, Sweden, Canada and the United States. Nell stresses however, that Griffith will always be their base. 🌄