

Smart Grain TRANSPORT

Productivity – moving goods from A to B at the lowest cost – is king in freight transport. Diesel Editor **Tim Giles** meets with a NSW operator, **Castlemac Traders**, that has found a smart way of hauling grain for export.



Having met Peter Parslow, Castlemac Traders' (CMT) Operations Manager and Freight Coordinator, a few times over the years, I thought I had a good understanding of the business he runs. A tipper operator based in Narromine, hauling grain hither and thither, it was easy to pigeonhole the operation to be like so many others all across rural Australia.

However, once the conversation gets down to details, it emerges this operation is far from the usual set-up we expect to find in this area. Tippers run grain from the farmers' paddocks into grain storage at harvest time, and haul grain from the storage facilities into the ports, or wherever it is bound, for the rest of the year.

Yes, CMT is in the tipper business and also has grain storage facilities, but it is the presence of a railway siding in the yard and talk of containers that piques *Diesel Magazine's* interest. This is no run-of-the-mill grain haulage story (pun intended), this is all about working smart.

"We started in trucks back in 1998," says Peter. "CMT was formed as the transport division of Agrigrain, a seed

business and grain trader. We needed trucks to cart our own seed – we had had some people doing it for us, but the seed got contaminated.

"It was a quality-control measure for Agrigrain. We started with one truck in 1998 and kept going until, at one stage, we got to 14. Since then, we have diversified a bit, gone back down to eight and put a couple of subbies on. However, we still do all of our own seed, in and out.

"We also run a packing business, which is Agrigrain's strength here. We load three trains a week with containers loaded for export and heading to Sydney, before going overseas."

Agrigrain has become the New South Wales arm of Western-Australian grain business Plum Grove. With its purchase of the Agrigrain business, Plum Grove entered the NSW grain market, providing grain buying and selling, seed and fertiliser, container packing and transport services in the state.

Plum Grove's business is based on buying and selling grain, but the addition of a transport and logistics arm adds to the diversity of its operations. It has partnerships in place with a number

of large grain and flour operations in several Asian countries, including Malaysia, giving it good reach.

Over half a million tonnes of grain pass through Agrigrain's Narromine facility on an annual basis, plus another 300,000 tonnes through its Coonamble facility, 180km to the north, making the business a major player in the NSW grain game.

Peter was Operation Manager in the Agrigrain yard when it was decided that the business would go into the transport game. The company wanted to control its own destiny and be able to ensure quality control over deliveries to and collections from customers. The first truck was originally intended to simply handle seed cartage, but over time the company realised the value of having its own truck handling other tasks within the business.

After using a semi for the work, the company moved over to truck and dog combinations, as they are able to get the highest payloads across the Blue Mountains, where full-size B-doubles are banned.

THE RIGHT TRUCK FOR THE JOB

"We run five PBS (Performance-Based Standards, ed.) truck and dog outfits



Peter Parslow, Operations Manager and Freight Coordinator, Castlemac Traders (CMT)

reckon going around via Yass is about 80km longer than going via Newcastle, but going that way you use about 60 litres less fuel."

It was issues like this that prompted Peter to take a good look at using the PBS rules to get a higher payload over the mountains, to aid productivity.

"People said – 'you don't want to do PBS, because you are going to be satellite tracked'," says Peter. "But we have no problems. All of our drivers on the PBS trucks have been with us for at least 14 years and they have no trouble. They drive to their book and drive to suit the tracker and we don't get any issues. If you don't do anything wrong, you don't get into trouble."

After experimenting with the first five-axle dog PBS unit, the company is looking to add another two of the same to the fleet. They can run at 63 tonnes gross combination mass (GCM), giving CMT a payload over 42 tonnes.

"I always said we would never get a B-double or a road train," says Peter. "Then we migrated to one B-double. When PBS vehicles came out, we were the third quad dog Tefco built to meet the standards.

"On the engine front, we have stuck to Detroit. At the moment we have

of our own," says Peter. "We have one five-axle dog and the other four are quad dogs. The quads have a 37.5 tonne payload. We also run three road train/B-doubles – they can run as a B-double going down to the coast and then, out here, we can put a dolly in them and run them as a road train."

Due to the Blue Mountains' truck restrictions, the B-doubles heading to Sydney either have to take the southern route via Yass, or sweep around to the north via Newcastle.

"The trouble is the customer expects you to quote for the shortest route, which is over the mountain," says Peter. "We



Performance-Based Standards (PBS) approved truck and five-axle dog.



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all DD15s fitted in Western Star 4800 models. All the Tefco trailers have BPW running gear. We have had no issues with the engines, but the fan does seem to work a bit too hard.

"About every 60,000 to 80,000km, we pull the intercooler out and clean them all down. We do it before harvest and we do it after harvest. We have a regime to make this happen."

KEEPING TRACK

"We are in Trucksafe – the drivers have to do a daily check and it is in all of the tracking systems as well," says Peter.

"We've been in the scheme since 2001, we used to do a bit of Incitec work and they require Trucksafe accreditation. We were also doing a lot of organic grain and human consumption grain, so we are better off being squeaky clean.

"We have one person full time keeping up with compliance. We are on Basic Fatigue Management (BFM, ed.) and don't need to go to Advanced Fatigue Management (AFM, ed.). We do run to Brisbane and Melbourne, but I've had three or four drivers pulled up when the Task Force is on, and they have asked our guys why they have BFM. They are

not using all of their hours, as it is.

"The thing is, it is just handy. I run a policy that drivers are home Friday night, so they have a happy home life. If you have a happy wife, you have a happy driver. Very seldom do we have a driver caught away over a weekend. Most drivers start the week on Sunday."

The company has a strict 'one man, one truck' policy with each driver getting a new truck and keeping it throughout its life before it is moved on after five or six years, around the one-million-kilometres point.

"We've had three accidents and none of them have been the driver's fault," says Peter. "One of our long-term drivers cried for three days after a car came across the median strip and pushed another car up onto the truck.

"Our youngest driver is 49," he adds. "These guys are all going to retire and I don't know how to get younger drivers.

"I had a driver retire and then I had a young bloke come in. He told me he used to do 7,000km a week, so I told him I was going to terminate the interview. He asked why and I told him no man can do 7,000km a week and do it legally. Needless to say, he didn't get a job."

Peter has also been involved in the Livestock, Bulk and Rural Carriers Association (LBRCA) in NSW since 2003 and now serves on its Grain Committee and its Executive Committee.

THE GRAIN GAME

A lot of the art of running a grain carting business is about bringing two contradictory imperatives together. On the one hand, the supply of grain from the paddock is extremely cyclical. The supply is full on for a certain period of the year, and then there is nothing. On the other hand, the demand for the finished products like flour or malt is consistent all year round. Customers need a guaranteed supply at all times to meet the demand for their products. The two competing elements are both the issue for and the reason for the existence of the operation.

CMT also carts chickpeas, wheat, lupins for human consumption, barley for malting in China.

Agrigrain stores around 140,000

“WE CAN STRIP AND LOAD A TRAIN AGAIN IN LESS THAN THREE HOURS.”

tonnes of grain at the Narromine facility, with the same again at the Coonamble site.

A couple of months prior to *Diesel's* visit, the facilities had been absolutely at their storage limit, but already 65,000 tonnes had been shipped out. This was being topped up with grain flowing in from on-farm storage to keep the supply moving.

A lot of farmers put their grain into storage then wait on the market and sell when the conditions and the prices are right. 2017 has seen a lot of grain being stored, after the particularly big harvest kept prices low.

“The transport division has got to pay its own way, we have to make our own profit, even if we are hauling our own company's product most of the time,”

says Peter. “We bring all of the grain into Narromine which has to be consolidated and packed into containers. The grain comes in to be stored in silos, ready to be packed into containers and shipped out by train, to the port.”

When the pressure is on for CMT, the two sites are capable of packing up to 60 containers a day. There are three trains a week out of Narromine alone, with each train carrying 58 containers.

The company's biggest problem is getting empty containers out to Narromine to be filled, an issue that is reflected nationwide – empty containers in the wrong place at the wrong time.

“The train pulls in next to our yard and we can strip and load it again in less than three hours,” says Peter. “We have two seven-tonne forklifts to take off all of the

empties and then use one big Yardmaster reach stacker to put on the full ones.

“Sometimes, if we've run out of empties, we may have to take twenty or so off the train, pack them and put them back on, slowing the task considerably. Also, when we load a train it can go to any of three ports in Sydney – Patrick, Hutchison or DP World, so the containers have to be in the correct position on the train.

“Our bottleneck is empty containers, and at the same time they are complaining about sending empty containers out of the country. The problem is a lot of the containers have got to be food grade, they come in as general purpose, but they have to be cleaned properly to bring them up to food grade.”

To complement the grain and seed work, CMT also handles moving fertiliser back out to the rural areas. The trucks in the fleet handle about 95 per cent of Agrigrain's haulage work and CMT also takes on work for outside operations to keep the wheels turning year round. **IID**

