



Graeme Martin

From the desk

At the start of another busy top-dressing season, it is interesting to reflect on events of the past year. The one development that really stands out is the relentless increase in the cost of fuel. This is our single biggest operational expense, and we have tried to absorb increases wherever possible, but eventually we have to account for them in our cost structure. As a result, we have had to pass some of these increased costs on to our customers.

This is not something we do lightly, especially as we are well aware of the reduced returns facing sheep farmers in particular.

The increasing focus on the environment, which has highlighted the increasing soil fertility on some farms, has meant that some farmers have chosen to reduce their phosphate inputs. On the other hand, we have seen an increase in the amount of lime being spread, and it appears that farmers are looking to increase productivity by improving soil pH.

The other key area of focus for us at Super Air has been the industry effort to improve the working environment for aerial operators. The recently published *Safety Guidelines for Farm Airstrips & Associated Fertiliser Cartage and Application* has been well received by the agricultural aviation industry and farming community. It has been very reassuring to see farmers' response to this initiative and we, as operators, are delighted to see the energy and enthusiasm that farmers have for upgrading airstrips and/or maintaining them to a good standard.

Over the past twelve months we have worked hard to improve our performance and ability to get your fertiliser on in a timely manner. We looked at many ways of trying to effect an improvement, and one of our solutions was to bring our 0800 service in house. This has given us a greater ability to capture orders and allocate the work evenly across our fleet. When booking your job, please phone 0800 787 372 - it won't cost you a thing and will help us to deliver you great service.

We wish you well for this year of farming and look forward to working with you.



Mark Gerritsen

Taking off

The newest member of the Super Air pilots is Mark Gerritsen, who is based at Masterton, having taken over from Bob Cranston.

Mark grew up on a dairy farm in the Coromandel, and although his parents' farm used groundspreader, the neighbour's property was steep enough to require aerial top-dressing. The sight and sound of the top-dressing plane skimming over the hills sparked Mark's interest and set him on the path to becoming an ag pilot himself.

Having researched his options, Mark chose to attend a training school in Motueka, where he spent a year training for his commercial licence. Following this, he needed to get his ag rating, which meant waiting until a suitable opportunity presented itself.

After a stint as a loader driver, he got his chance with Super Air when he was put under the tutelage of Shaun Burton at Pukekohe. Training involves spending 25 hours just flying the plane and getting used to it, followed by 65 hours of productive flying, spreading different products to get used to the way they feel.

'The productive flying was the most challenging,' says Mark. 'When you have a load on board the plane feels very different - it's much more sluggish.'

For the first 25 hours of the productive time Shaun was on board as a co-pilot, but for the last 40 Mark was flying solo, with Shaun acting as loader driver and observer.

'That's a good feeling,' says Mark, 'to have your trainer sitting on the ground and loading up the plane.'

Once qualified, Mark spent a couple of months at Dargaville, helping out during the busy season, and in early June he moved to Masterton. He's keen to get into the work.

'It's great to just get out there, do the work, deal with the cockies. You get a lot of satisfaction from doing a good job.'

Still flying

Congratulations go to our Tauranga-based part-time pilot, Derek Williams, who recently clocked

| *continued over*

Did you know?

It costs approximately \$500 to fly to and from a farm, only to find that the weather does not permit top-dressing.

up 30,000 hours of productive flying time in top-dressing. Derek has been flying for over half a century, and has worked in top-dressing for much of that time, starting out as a loader driver in 1955.

Initially with Adastra (which became part of James Aviation), Derek is a founding shareholder of Super Air, having started with the company in 1988. A true air enthusiast, he owns an AT-6 Harvard, which he bought from the RNZAF, and which he flies at special events, such as Anzac Day celebrations and Battle of Britain commemorations.

Just landed

After 28,000 productive flying hours, Wairarapa-based pilot Bob Cranston has decided it is time to retire. This will be Bob's second attempt at retirement (he briefly stopped flying in 1987), but he is adamant it is for real this time.

During his career, which stretches back to 1962, Bob flew everything from Piper Cubs to DC-3s, top-dressing in many parts of the North Island, including Wanganui, Rotorua, Taupo, the East Coast, Taumarunui and Whakatane. When top-dressing hit the doldrums in the 1980s, Bob even flew a freight run up and down the island for Field Air. He joined Super Air in the mid 1990s and finished his career with Air Services in June 2007.

'It's only in recent years that the industry has started to change,' he says. 'For a long time, farmers could still remember the effort involved in trying to get fert onto the hills by hand, and they were so pleased to have planes come along and top-dress.

'Now fertiliser is more sophisticated, and we have GPS units and special spreading devices on planes. In the past we had to rely solely on our own judgement.

'It's the people that make this a great industry, though – they are all enthusiastic and prepared to go the extra mile. I've always enjoyed my job and never had a case of Monday-itis. I consider myself a very

lucky man.'

Now that he's no longer flying, Bob plans to spend more time on land and sea, travelling, fishing and whitebaiting.

Ossie James, OBE, CNZM

New Zealanders farming steep country owe a good deal to Ossie James, who died in May of this year, aged 87. Ossie was widely regarded as one of the fathers of aerial top-dressing. Denied the chance to train as a pilot with the Air Force during World War II, Ossie instead worked as a mechanic on planes fighting the war in the Pacific.

Once back in New Zealand he learned to fly, buying his first plane – a Tiger Moth – in 1947. Combining his skills and interests, Ossie started his own agricultural aviation company, James Aviation. He moved to Hamilton and concentrated on building his company, and within ten years he had a fleet of 85 aircraft, and had bought similar businesses in both New Zealand and Australia.

Ossie achieved much during his life, including the introduction of the first helicopter into agricultural aviation, and the conversion of a DC-3 into a top-dressing plane.

For many, though, it will be the Fletcher aircraft that remains his most enduring legacy. Ossie wanted a plane that was economical, but that could also carry bigger payloads than were possible at the time. The Fletcher, built by a small company in the United States, was the answer. Eventually, Ossie's company would build 286 Fletcher aircraft, which were either exported or went into service in New Zealand skies.

Today, the Fletcher top-dressing plane is a common sight in our skies, and it is fitting that, at his funeral, Ossie was honoured with a flypast of Fletchers. Pilots from Super Air and the Waikato Aero Club participated in this, a fitting tribute to one of the industry's founding members.



Ossie James

0800 SUPERAIR

Want to get your fertiliser or lime on your land as quickly and efficiently as possible? Then make sure you book your job with Super Air using our 0800 number.



Your call comes straight in to the Super Air headquarters



Chief Pilot Mark Delaney picks it up.



Details of the job are logged in to the company's system



Mark checks to see who in the area can do the job



He assigns the job to the pilot who can do it with the least wait for the farmer



Your job is completed efficiently and effectively



AERIAL AGRICULTURAL SPECIALISTS

0800 787 372

www.superair.co.nz