



9am 2 June Newbridge

THROUGH 70 years and four generations, a productive family farm in northern Victoria has moved from traditional agriculture to a cutting-edge organic enterprise supplying markets throughout eastern Australia and beyond.

Begun by the Free and Baker families in the 1940s, the property at Tresco, near Lake Boga, has grown table and wine grapes, dried fruit, vegetables, cereal crops and stone fruit.

The owners' latest initiative is to form a marketing company, Alkira Organic, in conjunction with other organic producers, to promote and sell produce including stone fruits, apples, organic compost and up to 15 lines of vegetables.

Company spokesman Kelvin Free will share more about the families' blossoming organic enterprise when he speaks at a forum planned for Newbridge next week.

Entitled "The Business of Agribusiness", the event will be hosted by the Loddon Shire and Central Victorian Agribusiness Forum on Tuesday, June 2, at the Newbridge recreation reserve clubrooms.

Morning tea and lunch will be provided.

Other speakers will include Victorian Agriculture Minister Jaala Pulford, Loddon Shire Mayor Cr Gavan Holt, Victorian Farmers Federation president Peter Tuohey, Andrew Smith from Rural Finance and Tom Russo, of Elders Ltd.

Mr Free said future plans for Alkira Organics were definitely focused on expansion, centred on customer needs.

"This growth will need to take in new areas of production, as well as increasing the size and efficiency of our food handling infrastructure," he said.

"Research and experimentation aimed at continually improving organic production systems will be vital, not only for our own success, but for organic farming generally."

Rod Luke will speak on the latest trends in water investment on behalf of Kilter Rural, a specialist manager of Australian real assets of farmland, water and ecosystem services.

Assets currently under management by the company include 10,000 hectares of Victorian irrigation country and 71 gigalitres of water entitlements.

Mr Luke joined Kilter in 2008 and has been involved with the development of Kilter Rural's water business through innovative products for irrigators.

"My key messages will focus on changes in legislation which are creating new opportunities and how innovative ideas develop in new markets," Mr Luke said.

"Networking events such as this are important to build profile for our company and to improve the knowledge of what is a reasonably new and complex water market."

Sam Lim is an investment advisor and facilitator, based in Kuala Lumpur, but frequently travelling around South East Asia and across China.

"My primary focus is to facilitate investments in Australian agriculture and to encourage export opportunities, particularly to Asia," Mr Lim said.

"Branding and connectivity will be the key to success in growing Australian agribusinesses. The Australian brand already enjoys strong acceptance among Asian consumers, so the job is half-done.

"I'm a keen supporter of the idea that people should be 'on the ground', whether that means Australian producers going to Asia to see how Asians eat or Asian buyers coming to the regions to see the type of food Victoria produces.

"In our current age of cheap travel and advanced IT, I believe these gaps can be easily closed."

CEO of mushroom compost producer ScatoPlus Bill Littleton will stress to his audience that predicting market trends is the key to successful planning.

"Getting the right help at the right time according to the growth of your business is critical," Mr Littleton said.

"Government initiatives can play a crucial role in enabling entrepreneurs to prepare for, and seize, the market opportunities that will contribute to regional wealth.

"We intend to double our mushroom compost operations within four years from 700 tonnes to 1400 tonnes a week.

"Domestic demand accounts for most of this growth, but export demand is also significant, starting from a low base of less than 10 tonnes and ramping up to 100 tonnes a week."

The Central Victorian Agribusiness Forum's agenda is focused on supporting agribusinesses in the Gannawarra, Loddon, Central Goldfields, Campaspe and Mount Alexander Shires and the City of Greater Bendigo.

Tickets to the forum cost \$55 and can be booked online. Go to www.cvaf.webs.com or www.trybooking.com/123568

For more details, phone Martin Szakal on 0421 324 509.

