



Our People

Sarah Furney shares what it takes to lead at the helm of one of the country's foods producers



By [Elizabeth Frias](#)

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📷 Ben Furney Flour Mills chief executive officer Sarah Furney. Picture by Belinda Soole

Every business leader tends to follow morning routines to plan their



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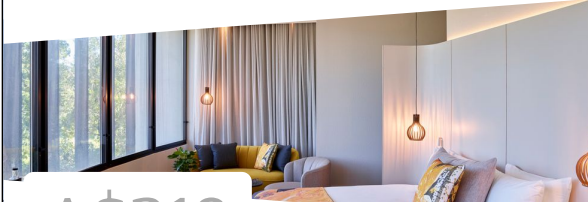
time I set aside for thinking and reflection to get my head into strategic space" and then gets to work to tackle the hardest or biggest tasks for the day.

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From thereon, her daily diary appointments flow at a "hectic pace", running a successful family-owned business producing one of the country's recognisable food brands supplied across the eastern seaboard markets' chain, and overseas to New Zealand and Thailand.

When the *Daily Liberal* came for the mid-day interview on Friday, Ms Furney was focused on one of her priorities for the day; an early industry forecast heading towards what's looking to be a tough grains harvest season as La Nina drenching impacts the western region's wheat belt.

"It has been a very wet growing season for wheat," Ms Furney said. "Our prediction in terms of quality is it's going to be impacted negatively which means we'll see low protein wheat rather than high protein which this area is accustomed to.



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"If this rain continues into November, we'll certainly see a lot of wheat downgraded from [high protein] milling to feed quality. The volume will be there, the yield will be there, but the quality is questionable."

The flour milling industry is coming off the back of a similar bumper harvest last year, Ms Furney said.

"Great volume but 80 percent of crops were downgraded to feed grade so that's not applicable for milling wheat going into the food industry."

A reduced volume of high-quality wheat for milling could push prices further up because last year's stock is already out of storage and distributed across the supply chain, Ms Furney said.

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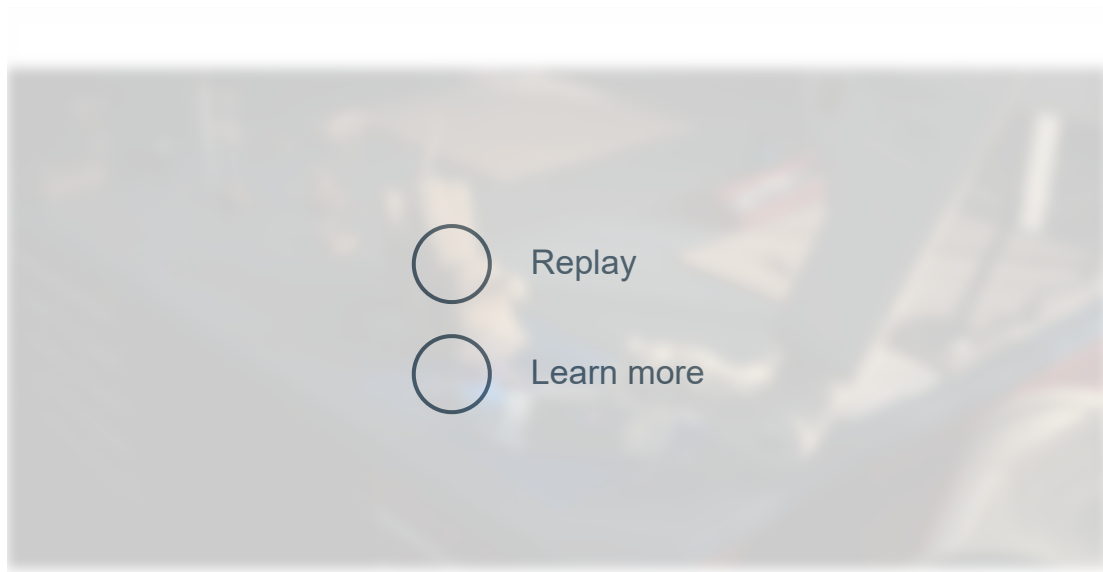
Ben Furney Flour Mills' brands include the Sarah Jane Fine Foods, which is made into pizza dough, bread, pastries, pancake batters, cakes mixes, biscuits, flour for scones and artisan types of ingredients, as well as the Pura Feeds brands for pet foods.



quality harvests from within 200 kilometres, so basically, the mill is producing food products from the paddock to the plate.

Last year, Australia's wheat production increased by 91 percent to 29 million tonnes, a record yield since 2017, according to the company's state of the season forecast.

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Another bumper 28.9 million tonnes of wheat are expected harvested now and into summer, and after years of drought, there is renewed excitement, as Ms Furney confirmed they're "back to normal production pre-Covid levels".

"We've reached our pre-COVID volumes again so I guess the challenge out there is we're back to normal business but it's the new normal.

"Like every other business, we're not immune to supply chain constraints, increases in costs of doing business such as fuel and energy costs, so its a bit more of a challenging environment."



business making sure its clientele, consisting mainly of supermarkets, bakeries and food makers, were adequately stocked.

When COVID affected the company's workforce, Ms Furney said they did not stop production and facilitated alternative plans "to ensure we were able to continue to operate while keeping the team safe and without causing our clients' delays".

Ms Furney said she was amazed by their employees who "went above and beyond".

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Those efforts resulted in the company receiving the Outstanding Work Health and Safety Award at the 2020 SafeWork NSW Awards, in the midst of a pandemic for operating in a changing environment.

Last year, the company was named 2021 Western NSW Business of the Year, also taking the Excellence in the Business category pitted against top contenders in the western region.

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22 years, Ms Furney said her most important role is not as CEO but as "chief engagement officer" having learned from experience "what it takes to lead people."


"I refer to myself as chief engagement officer because it's all about fostering culture, creating the right environment for our staff, always very closely connected to the teams and understanding what helps to make them successful.

"That's a big part of my job being a conduit because their success is our company's success and ultimately our customers' success."

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When Covid caused staff absences in the production line, Ms Furney took over some shifts.

"I've worked on the packing line with the boys, and it was really nice to get an opportunity to walk in their shoes for a day and see what the job's like and appreciate what they do."

While Ms Furney, a wife and mother of two, steers the helm along with her brother Tim Furney as the chief operating officer, she credits the hardworking and dedicated teams around them for



in Australia.

Ms Furney said the company's vision to be the best at what they do, and not necessarily the biggest in the business hasn't changed since their parents, John and Diane retired.

"We are forging ahead in further developing our plant protein range, introducing new technology across the business to optimise our productivity and provide opportunities for our team to further develop their skills and expertise," Ms Furney said.

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Elizabeth began her news reporting days at Western Sydney before joining the Daily Liberal's Dubbo NSW newsroom.

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