



John Shrimpton's high country station Glenthorne is popular for a range of recreational attractions.

Campaigner keeps it confidential

GERARD HUTCHING

The irony is not lost on high country farmer and investment banker John Shrimpton. In 2008 he had to go through a lengthy process to satisfy the Overseas Investment Office (and minister) that he should be granted the right to buy Ryton and Glenthorne stations in Canterbury for \$39.5 million. Today the Englishman is leading the charge to stop Shanghai Maling investing \$261m into meat co-operative Silver Fern Farms, a case which the OIO is considering.

Supporters describe it as a game changer for the industry, potentially opening up marketing opportunities by using the Chinese company's connections and expertise. Opponents say it will remove the company's ability to determine its own future, and turn over majority ownership into foreign hands.

Shrimpton wants to bring the process around the deal out into the open, yet prefers to keep a low profile. Asked for an interview for this article, he declined.

Recently he hired a PR person whose latest role has been promoting the sale of Lochinver Station to Shanghai Pengxin.

Apart from a few unhappy shareholders and NZ First who oppose the deal – which received 82 per cent shareholder support in October last year – it appeared until recently the match-up might be a foregone conclusion, barring OIO disapproval.

But in April, Shrimpton and 80 other shareholders making up 7 per cent of total shareholding, called for a special meeting for another vote.

Legally, Silver Fern Farms is compelled to hold it on August 12, even though any decision will not be binding.

Happy to discuss the issue, Shrimpton is loath to talk about himself and his motivations. The facts speak for themselves, he maintains.

Ohakune farmer John McCarthy, who fronted ginger group Meat Industry Excellence from 2013 until 2015, and became a director of Shrimpton's company a few days after the deal was



John Shrimpton, high country runholder, investment banker and Shanghai Maling investment challenger.



Dragon Capital's logo. Shrimpton's company is Vietnam's largest asset manager.

announced, admires his convictions. "He's an incredibly private, decent and highly principled man," he says.

SFF management and supporters of the deal are less charitable. To them Shrimpton and his supporters are frustrating an investment for which there is overwhelming support.

An anonymous onlooker said Shrimpton simply wants to protect his assets in the co-operative, New Zealand's largest meat processor with a turnover of \$2.4 billion. Last year it made a profit of \$24.9m. Shrimpton is reported to be SFF's biggest single shareholder, with 1.5 per cent of the total.

NZ First has described the deal as a "sweet Chinese deal" but "sour for farmers". Leader Winston Peters has also recently railed against some foreign buyers of farmland.

"Advantages rest with foreign buyers who have deep pockets and are favoured by low offshore interest rates, but it is important we ensure Kiwi buyers are not squeezed out," Peters said in March.

Shrimpton's deep pockets were developed through his being a co-director and founder of merchant bank Dragon Capital. Established in 1994, the Virgin Island-based company is the leading asset manager in Vietnam with total assets under management worth around \$1.7 billion.

In 2010 Shrimpton was reported as resigning from the company amidst a management reorganisation. But a report this April from the International Finance Corporation, the private lending vehicle of the World Bank Group, said co-founders Dominic Scriven (CEO) and Shrimpton collectively hold 70.5 per cent of Dragon Capital.

If Shrimpton has any relationship to Dragon Capital, it is impossible to find on the company's website, which contains no reference to him at all.

By all accounts he has been a careful steward of Glenthorne Station (now incorporating Ryton Station), the 25,300 hectare property situated between the Wilberforce, Harper and Avoca rivers.

He has altered uneconomic farming methods, conserved ecological features and protected fragile wetlands. As part of the OIO conditions to buy the land he had to clear unofficial camping structures but continue to allow public access.

Even though the stand-off with Shrimpton has strained relations, SFF continues to extol the station on its website in an article describing it as "the perfect host farm to show off this part of the world".

And the unfailingly civil Shrimpton says he would be the first to shake SFF chairman Rob Hewett's hand if the vote goes against him.

At the beginning of last year, before Shanghai Maling became a name on every SFF shareholders' lips, Glenthorne hosted a group of top Chinese chefs to show them how Silere merino lamb should be cooked.

And yes – the chefs were all from Shanghai.

Humble stumble bypassed in comp

Organisers are relying on the mates of top farmers to advance their names for the South Island Farmer of the Year competition.

In the past the competition run by the Lincoln University Foundation relied on entries from farmers, but organisers found they were often too humble to put their names forward.

Since nominations were accepted entry numbers have increased, as has their quality, reflected by last year's tie between Omarama Station and Clearwater Mussels for the title.

Farmers have until August 1 to advance themselves or nominate another farmer.

Foundation chairman Ben Todhunter said one of the best ways to getting good numbers and quality entries in the competition was through nominations.

"In earlier years it was difficult to get farmers to put their own hand up, but since we have allowed nominations, entries have shot up as it seems to take the 'tall poppy' factor out of it and farmers are more willing to let their nomination go forward."

He said the judging process permitted small family-owned enterprises to have just as good a chance as large corporate operations of winning one of the four special prizes of \$5000 cash or the top



Clearwater Mussels owners Lyn Godsiff, left, and John Young were the co-winners of last year's South Island Farmer of the Year competition.

prize of a \$20,000 travel and study grant.

Todhunter said organisers were seeking the same range of entries as last year's competition to reflect the diversity of farming excellence, leadership and entrepreneurs in the South Island.

"Last year we had excellent entries which resulted in a tie, with Omarama Station and Clearwater Mussels sharing the honours.

"This substantially boosted public interest and we had excellent attendance at all of our events."

Last year's joint winner John Young of Clearwater Mussels said entering the

competition had real benefits for farmers.

He said the competition had given them the unexpected benefit of analysing their farming strategies, financial markers, people and markets to build a more innovative business and had helped them educate a wider audience about mussel farming.

The competition is open to farm businesses in agriculture, horticulture, viticulture and aquaculture. Judging will start during September with the finals to be held at Lincoln University in November.

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