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Working for your supper

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TAFE Riverina Primary Industries teacher John Hawkins and Junee Correctional Centre farm manager Andrew Patterson in the gaol's sheep yards.

INMATES mates at Junee's gaol might plant their crops by hand, including as many as 7000 pumpkins this season, but they are far from the stereotypical images of chain gangs with hoes that one might conjure up in their head.

GEO Group Australia manages the centre and executive support officer Haley Robertson said a key message was this facility was a working gaol. The inmates must work six hours a day and there's no room for slacking in the cell blocks, as sick days must be legitimate with a certificate provided from the medical staff.

The farm totals 66 hectares of which 44ha of dryland lucerne is divided into four paddocks and from one 11ha paddock they had a contractor cut 90 bales of hay.

Haley said a small wage is paid to workers, with 28 of the 853 inmates working on the farm at any one time. This “pocket money” gives them a few dollars to spend on leisure activities such as television or on goodies at the facility’s supermarket.

Which jobs each inmate was assigned to was determined by the skills they brought with them from the “outside”, said farm manager Andrew Patterson.

"Wouldn't you rather be working out here than in there?" he said pointing to the inside of the prison's security fence.

"They (inmates) know they have to behave when they are working on the farm, as it's a privilege that can be taken away."

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Andrew is tasked with keeping the jobs up to the inmates, which can range from planting the crops by hand to mowing the grounds with push mowers. He said anything they produced, including vegetables, fruit, herbs, spices and eggs, was used in the correctional centre's kitchen to prepare meals for all inmates.

This year, due to water restrictions on the farm, Andrew asked inmates to select plants which were most water efficient. The answer was pumpkins - 7000 seedlings were planted by hand, up considerably from the 3500 planted last year which produced a six tonne crop. The surplus is given to local soup kitchen and aged care facilities.

The farm also has three greenhouses, a shade covered nursery, and six hectares of vegetable patches and orchards. The fresh produce supplied to the kitchen includes beetroot, rhubarb, garlic, onion, radish, carrot, tomatoes, button squash, zucchinis, chillies, chives, kale, peaches, olives and strawberries. Almonds are also grown, but they are not to be taken into the prison due to allergy concerns.

With RoundUp being the only spray used, to control pests they use companion plants, such as marigolds, and the farm also has 200 Isa Brown and Langshan chooks which lay about 140 eggs a day. They also run 100 first-cross ewes and 80 composite ewes which they join to White Suffolk rams, with the lambs sold at the Wagga Wagga saleyards.

The farm also has a two-year-old Kelpie-cross working dog, Jess, which serves an incentive for inmates to keep their behaviour in check. Andrew said for one inmate who had been in for a long time, the opportunity to work with Jess each day was his reason for living.

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