

We didn't think they would let us down



JAN 3, 2018: Sparks from a welder working on an offal bin accidentally ignite material at TFI's main cattle and sheep processing plant at Murray Bridge.

JAN 3, 2018: CEO Darren Thomas receives a call about a "small fire", then a second call about it being larger than first estimated. Social media pictures give him a sense that 20 years of work has vanished in minutes.

JAN 4, 2018: An emotional and exhausted Mr Thomas fronts a

press conference, promising to rebuild, bigger and stronger.

JAN 5, 2018: TFI workers offered counselling, advice and information.

JAN 6, 2018: Queensland's Teys Australia offers temporary work at its Naracoorte abattoir.

JAN 12, 2018: The fire is extinguished.

FEB 17, 2018: A \$1.3 million State Government grant is announced towards Lobethal abattoir expansion to support the

redeployment of workers.

MAR 23, 2018: Mr Thomas talks publicly about the fire, reveals a young female worker's decisive action, based on a hunch, that helped save 900 lives. She made the call to evacuate the plant before any of the smoke detectors, any of the equipment went off.

JAN-MAR, 2018: 450 Murray Bridge employees redeployed at TFI's Lobethal; Tamworth meatworks added 150 new positions; 90 staff remain at Murray

Bridge, 500 seasonal workers let go.

APR 6, 2018: Darren Thomas reveals \$300m plan to rebuild.

JAN 3, 2019: New greenfields site identified by TFI at Murray Bridge, not confirmed.

APR 2, 2019: \$7m from Federal Budget towards roadworks for Thomas Foods' new abattoir.

JUN 6, 2019: Thomas Foods International to invest in meat processing plant, 8km from the previous plant.

The new abattoir will employ about 400 people initially, ramping up to 2000 jobs at its peak.

Murray Bridge Mayor Brenton Lewis praised the investment, saying he knew the Thomas family would not let the city down.

Mr Thomas did not detail the exact cost of the project, but said it was unprecedented for the SA food industry. He has previously indicated a new facility would cost more than \$300 million.

The company's decision to hold true to its promise to "rebuild bigger and better" comes at a time when the Australian agriculture sector is struggling with drought conditions and record livestock prices.

Mr Thomas dismissed suggestions the timing of the rebuild was risky, saying the business took pride in investing "in the hard times".

"My father (company founder Chris) is known for going against the flock," Mr Thomas said.

"We are going through unprecedented times in the Australian agriculture sector ... this is the time when you need to invest.

"We look through the horizons and this is a 50-year investment, which I hope I am around to see."

The new abattoir will be 10km from the town centre and 8km from the company's old facility, which was partially destroyed by a week-long fire that started on January 3, 2018.

The fire was caused accidentally when sparks from a welder working on an offal bin ignited material. All 900 staff were evacuated safely after an unidentified female worker raised the alarm. Mr Thomas has described the woman as an "absolute hero". The new abattoir is set to begin production by November 2020.

It will be supported by \$7 million from the Federal Government and \$17 million from the State Government. That money will go towards infrastructure, including roadworks.

Before the blaze, the old abattoir employed about 1600 people. The two abattoirs will both operate in the short to medium term.

Mr Thomas said the announcement reaffirmed the company's commitment to rebuild following the fire.

"This is the single-biggest investment by our company in its 30-year history and on a scale not seen in our industry for many years," he said.

"It's also our long-term commitment to our community, staff, customers and livestock suppliers throughout South Australia and Australia.

"We have been in Murray Bridge for 20 years and it took one day to destroy that. We are not going to rebuild overnight, but we are hoping to have it running by the end of next year."

The abattoir will be built in stages, with a beef processing facility to be finished first.

Mr Thomas said the focus would be on local jobs, but raised concerns about a skills shortage.

"Finding labour in any food industry is incredibly difficult. Today we still have 1300 people employed in SA, so our absolute number one preference would be for our local people who will be trained.

"We have a proud history of being able to train people. Some of our senior staff today were school leavers from Murray Bridge High School.

"In the early days, we should be able to maintain our workforce from our local pool.

"It will be difficult, but we are looking forward to that (staffing) challenge."

Premier Steven Marshall said the state and federal governments were helping to "unlock economic potential and create more jobs" by funding road and utility infrastructure to the new Murray Bridge site.

"True to his word, Darren Thomas has announced today that Murray Bridge will be opening again bigger and better than ever," Mr Marshall said yesterday.

"It's great news for livestock producers right across our state, it's great for exports, regional jobs and for our state."

He said the taxpayer investment of \$24 million was "necessary to get the project over the line", following rumours the plant could move to Victoria.

Mr Lewis said it was a great day for his council district after the "dark cloud that had hung over Murray Bridge after the fire".

"The Thomas family has never let us down before and we didn't think they would let us down, and today's proof of that," Mr Lewis said.