GRDC In Conversation - Tom Coggan

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**SPEAKERS**

Oli Le Lievre, Tom Coggan

**Tom Coggan** 00:00

I'll have a crack at it. Why not?

**Oli Le Lievre** 00:01

I reckon you'll be a pretty good speaker after a farm tour, I think so you know what's interesting? I would have well spoken probably half a dozen different people over the last few days and they were saying, Well, who are you chatting to? And I run through the list and I bring up your name and they go. Yeah, right. He'll be an interesting fella, he's having a fair crack. And I think yeah, Tom, what would be interesting is I've only seen probably a tiny part of your grain operation here and what's going on but more broadly, what have you guys got going on here at home?

**Tom Coggan** 00:31

Oh, there's we run a pretty intensive cropping operation. So pretty heavy in double cropping pretty regularly with with the right rainfall, plenty of nutrition. So farming about 12,000 hectares consistently we were fence the fence this year. So that made harvest a very long one.

**Oli Le Lievre** 00:52

Yeah.

**Tom Coggan** 00:53

We pretty much doing most things ourselves here, we mix all our own concrete for all our own development work. The only thing that we really buy in is our, like molasses and cottonseed for the feedlot, whereas most other things are all done in house. So that keeps that's a fair, fair job in itself. So like all our like put silos in with all the concreting, and everything to save, do own earthworks, build our own dams, do all our design work on laser levelling. We've got a feedlot as well, it's licenced out to 20,000 head. It's, what 5000 sheep units in that 20,000. And the 19500 cattle. It's built to 10,000 head. We've just got a regional development grant as well in the last 12 months. So we're expanding our sheep operation. Feedlots have gone from one shed to three sheds with full blown handling facility and loadout facility. So that's pretty cool as well. We run six to 800 Breeder cows depending on the season. Ewes we run 3500 And they are on a double joining cycle as well. So there's pretty much work 365 No matter where you look.

**Oli Le Lievre** 02:04

I can imagine and just for those listening who aren't familiar with Coggan farms, whereabouts in Queensland are you?

**Tom Coggan** 02:11

We're about about five hours west of Brisbane our closest major centre would be Goondiwindi. Tara is kinda close, but it I wouldn't. It's not as it's probably not big enough to have machinery dealerships and everything. So we're doing a fair bit of business through Goondiwini, Dalby and Toowoomba that's kind of our heartland of where we do everything with, St. George we do a bit with as well. But majority is we're going east for food or time away or anything. So it's quite normal to be we do you do your business where you're travelling. So yeah.

**Oli Le Lievre** 02:47

What's the area like around here mainly cattle or is it a fair bit of farming?

**Tom Coggan** 02:52

Oh in our direct vicinity. And like Ingliston is probably our closest area like there's a local golf course and a local area there. It's pretty heavily cropping. Probably when you go from here to Mooney would be there's cattle grazing in the middle. But I'd say pretty heavily cropping like return return on hector is pretty reasonable. We've had we're pretty reliable with rainfall. Like we've had, like we got hit pretty hard with the drought in 2019 but pretty, like reliable.

**Oli Le Lievre** 03:23

When you guys say that, like what would what would it be inside 10 year cycle? How many years are you gonna get your cropping programme in?

**Tom Coggan** 03:30

We've planted a crop every year? Like Dad, when talking to dad, he's never missed a planting. Like we've always planted something and always got a result. So there's like that's, that's good. We're not. We're not West where you miss five and get 10 or miss three and get three. It's yeah, we're pretty consistent. Just got to take the opportunity when the good one comes like last year.

**Oli Le Lievre** 03:52

Yeah I was gonna say like, what do you reckon the key to successful farming is out here?

**Tom Coggan** 03:56

I think just taking the opportunities when they come. Like I think if you're on a fixed rotation, you can miss miss an opportunity. Like in 2015 16 we planted chickpeas on chickpeas three years in a row. And it paid dividends with because we're able to grow our chickpeas, sell them out and buy wheat back into the feedlot. And we were three times the price on exit with chickpeas versus wheat. So like I feel like just taking a slightly different step and trying to... We're farm grain farmers at heart but we are essentially rain farmers like we do whatever the rain does. So we have to be prepared that if it, we have a late we have a fallow period and we get rain and you don't want to plant and you've missed the planting window and the rain comes you need to be able to adapt to move that in. So we got a grain dryer on site. So we're probably on the later window of sorghum planning now, but because we had wheat issues, we've had a heap of rain Without the ability of it, we've since we've got our dry grinder, we've got that ability to fall back on, we can plant the air and guarantee we're going to still be able to deliver on quality moisture in spec grain and land the high price.

**Oli Le Lievre** 05:11

Yep.

**Tom Coggan** 05:12

So that gives us a pretty good opportunity there.

**Oli Le Lievre** 05:15

My god. I'm, what's running through my head is like so, if you were to look at the business, and and maybe yeah, just for context, who's involved? Who are the key decision makers? And what does the management team look like?

**Tom Coggan** 05:27

Oh, well, it's a fifth generation farm. So we've been here since 37. My grandfather, and grandma have stepped away from the business. He had a pretty major heart operation in 05 to 07. Like he's kind of in and out. And then he came back full time in at the end of 07. So he's been, he's probably not as heavy involved as what he was. And then through to 2016, he had another life threatening occurrence with health. And it's been really good to still have my grandfather around. But he's taken pretty big step back now. He's still, he still would be here every day of the week, if his health allowed it. And my grandma allowed it. She likes being retired, but he is bored, he reckons. But yeah, so he stepped in, they've stepped out of the business in the last two years. And Mum and Dad have full ownership of everything now. Like there's still a few things that have got to sort out. But that's the same with any family farming family. It's not just, we're not just a unique pitch, everyone's the same.

**Oli Le Lievre** 06:30

Yeah.

**Tom Coggan** 06:32

So mom and dad of the boss, I'm probably under them. They give me pretty good leeway on whatever endeavour I want to do with in the business. I'm not, I'm not forced to drive a tractor for 24 hours a day and just sit on a tractor. Dad and mom have made a pretty big, heavy role to make sure that I'm across everything in our business. That That way, if something would ever happen, I'm across it. But also, if I've got those skills, it means that if I'm ever somewhere at a mate's place, or at a field day or whatever, if there's an opportunity to see something that can improve the efficiency of I'm across everything to know, to be able to take that step, not just sitting there going Oh, well, how would that work? If I knew nothing about our cattle? I know, enough to know about it, if that makes sense.

**Oli Le Lievre** 07:17

Mate, That's very forward thinking. Because it is is knowing that you're probably the most mobile of anyone in the business.

**Tom Coggan** 07:22

Yeah

**Oli Le Lievre** 07:22

That that thinking of going. Yeah, how do you, How do you get that 1% gain five year game, whatever it might be

**Tom Coggan** 07:28

Like when I was in high school is pretty like I just wanted to be on the header at harvest and just drive the header. But now this year, I probably work on the logistics side of organising trucks and saving money on freight and working to make sure allocating it into our storages to make sure we get our proteins right and moistures right, because that's all the where the all the little one percenters are. So I'll probably say I'd probably chasing the 1% of gains rather than being in the tractor just going backwards and forwards.

**Oli Le Lievre** 07:59

Do you miss sitting in the tractors and headers and things?

**Tom Coggan** 08:00

It's pretty nice sometimes. I think I think I have an appreciation of everyone who drives them for us, like we've got a very good crew. They're very accommodating to like to, like they're very good with when I give them direction and understand that I don't have to be like, I can't I'm not in the machine all the time. So. But I'd like to say with supporting all our staff, I am across pretty much everything that we do. So I'm only a phone call away, I can pretty much off the cuff tell you what I've got to do to fix it. So would you say you're probably the the most active in terms of engaging with everyone across the business? Oh, I think one thing that my parents have done very well as they've allowed us all to run our own sections, but also be quite fluid between each other sections as well. So maybe on the communication standpoint, I'm probably really active, but then there's other areas that mum really excels in. And then there's other areas that dad really excels in. So I think the from a diversity standpoint, it's very important that we're all across everything. But we've got key skills that we're probably each one of us individually are better at.

**Oli Le Lievre** 09:15

And what do you reckon, like on that as, as in, I know they've got you across everything in the business, as you say, but then also going well actually, let's play to your strengths and and develop where we can what needs to be developed, but actually also go, what's going to be best for for the business?

**Tom Coggan** 09:30

Yeah well, I probably think one of my strengths is probably being a I'm a pretty heavy communicator with our staff, whether they're older or younger. So being a communicator is pretty important. Especially with the number of staff we run so like the wage bill can step up pretty high within efficiencies if you're not across it all and making sure your goals are getting hit and everyone's rocking up to work on time and keeping everything rolling. Dad is a very cool head very understanding of when things break, he can fix anything. He's very good at, like, if something goes wrong, he always just keeps the situation very calm doesn't allow things to be said between people or anything. Like if someone hits a fence post or something, it's very cool head, it's not a problem, we can get through it. It's better than anyone being hurt sort of mindset. I think dad is a very good farmer. He's very talented at what he does. Like he's picking off opportunities and stuff is pretty I'm if I can do what he can do, I'll be pretty proud. Mom's a very good communicator. So she's really good in our like, the HR of our business and keeping the wheels on the whole show with everything, like paying the bills and questioning things and making sure that if dad goes, oh, I want a new tractor, or I want a new header. He will make he'll challenge Dad and Mom will challenge dad to make sure like he jumps through all the hoops and ticks all the boxes to make sure it's not just like make sure it's a sensible business choice, not just a choice, because you want it you know.

**Oli Le Lievre** 11:05

Yeah right. I'm sure there's some interesting conversations around the table.

**Tom Coggan** 11:08

Yeah I think it's quite healthy, though. I think. I think one thing that maybe it has evolved with the businesses that since I've kind of stepped into the fold, and mum and dad have gone out on their own, I think they've very much allowed us to facilitate being really good as an individual, but also making sure we're all striving in the right direction. And having a disagreement is not a bad thing. Like mom always says it diversity lucky, we're all diverse and different. Because if there was three Tom's in the business, it probably wouldn't work.

**Oli Le Lievre** 11:09

100% yeah. Totally. I think what's interesting, I would say, your old man's cool head. So only a very simple example. But go around the corner before truck driving along with brakes on cause have a malfunction within the truck. But so interesting where I'd say, especially younger people like Yeah, three tractors moving trucks going left, right and centre and something like that happens. Others could really jump quite quickly to a "What the fuck's going on here?". Probably can't say that. What's going on here?

**Tom Coggan** 12:12

Yeah.

**Oli Le Lievre** 12:14

Whereas for you it was like, oh well. What's worth kinda working yourself

**Tom Coggan** 12:18

Yeah, well, I think I think people is a very big asset. It's probably maybe in years gone by probably not as big as important role. But now with wages going up, the good people are harder to find, you got to look after the ones you got. And at the end of the day, we all make mistakes, where just because you own the farm doesn't mean that you're not going to make a mistake, like, yeah, you own the gear, if you hurt it it's your fault. But I think having pride in what you do, if you if you as an owner, have pride in what you do, and don't get angry at them, then they might go that extra mile for you. Or they might be a bit more accommodating for you that if you're you're on the weekend, and suddenly the cattle are out of water and you're away five hours away, they'll probably help you. So that's like today in that situation. Steven, one of our guys is really good guy. And if I'd probably gone and stomped on him, then it I probably could be a bad situation, but he's probably gonna go he probably drive the planter for us tonight because we got rain coming. So it's give and take. Where do you reckon you've learnt that, like, I'll say that management and leadership style from? No I think a bit on the job. And also just, I feel like I've been like that probably growing up from my different experiences from going to boarding school. And learning to respect the older guys above seem boring, but also knowing when you're in within your role to do that. Going to uni, interacting with a heap of different people. I found my job at UQ was very good for like recapping and reevaluating and stuff because every time you went out on a shift, we spoke at schools, and then you had a review in the car ride home with your partner and talked about what worked well, what didn't work well. So I was in a classroom environment pretty regularly in uni.

**Oli Le Lievre** 14:06

Tell me more about that

14:07

So I was a UQ ambassador, so what we did was we went to schools and just spoke about unis and goal setting. We probably weren't a hard, we weren't the hardcore, like selling uni we were more setting yourself up for future whether that is tertiary education or an apren-, like a traineeship or whichever direction you want to go. So that was quite cool to be in that environment. And justify it's okay not to go to uni, but also talking about the benefits of it. So I feel like that role was really key with some of the things I've learned just in reflection, and things like that, because it's I don't there wasn't I've never had another job like that or never been in another environment where you present have a heap of like you're interacting with 30 40 kids in a classroom, and then you reflect on that 20 minutes straight after the session. So.

**Oli Le Lievre** 15:05

Was that just something that was was also part of the training? Like part of the culture that was created? Yeah.

**Tom Coggan** 15:11

Yeah. That was the culture at UQ. Yeah.

**Oli Le Lievre** 15:13

That's really interesting.

**Tom Coggan** 15:14

Yeah. So that that job I only stumbled across because my older sister had done it. And then they, they, they don't, their staff turnover is quite low. And like, of course, people graduate, that's where the turnover happens. But there had been a fair few members that hadn't gone anywhere, and there was only intake of eight. So I was lucky enough to receive the job, it paid quite well for uni as well. But yeah, it was great.

**Oli Le Lievre** 15:38

Always helpful.

**Tom Coggan** 15:39

And you could like roster on so it worked quite well, because you came out and you had a month roster, you could roster for five shifts a week, one, whatever. So coming home to work on holidays and stuff. I didn't lose my part time job in uni, I could just go on going home for three weeks. Don't worry, I'm gonna, I'll come back, but I'm just not there right now. So I was really good casual job with that mindset of that. And, and I think also, with the skills, just watching. And just, I probably would say I'm not a pushy person by nature, I'm very like, would like to be observant and always ask questions. Like when I was little, I always just wanted to question things and understand them didn't want to just go well, that's how it's done. That's how it's got to be very happy to adapt. And yeah.

**Oli Le Lievre** 16:29

So well, I'll make my assumption would would be like, looking at you now. You're so passionate about the farm. Did you find it hard to be removed from it while you're at uni? Or did you actually enjoy kinda that

**Tom Coggan** 16:39

I had, I feel like I was facilitated quite well, with mum and dad and my peer group at uni and everything. Like the farming has been a very big part of my background. But like at boarding school, I'd probably talk to dad every day, just about the farm and how things are going. And I feel like that was very like if I had, if Dad hadn't been as communicative or, or excited to tell me his things like just little things like at school we'd talk about pulling a hay bail talking about something just on the phone. Probably, I didn't feel as removed. Like it wasn't like maybe 20 years ago, where there wasn't as much communication, I reckon that removal would have been a lot harder. But now with communication, it's so open. Like when I was studying for my master's, I was away for three weeks. And we were pretty busy here but I was able to still it and still work.

**Oli Le Lievre** 17:30

Tell me a little bit so studied, obviously at UQ undergrad, then this thing, which is a thing of the past COVID came through.

**Tom Coggan** 17:37

Yeah.

**Oli Le Lievre** 17:38

And a decision further study what well firstly like part of the story that I know you're all man dropped out in year 10. But you were you've really, I guess been supported to continue your education pathway.

**Tom Coggan** 17:51

Dad did your 10. And then he did a ag college for two years. So he was 18 when he came home and he was not against study, he was not for study, he was just very neutral. And it was whatever, whatever I wanted to do. And mum's mum side is she's an ex nurse. She has a triple nurse. So she's quite qualified at that. And I think having a parents that's done a parent that's done each type, each pathway was quite good too. We always just spoke about it growing up that it was either like whatever you wanted to do, as long as your pathway was happy, but just making sure that whatever you did, you threw 100% into it. So that's probably the mindset to go to uni I kind of got to was started. When we had to pick our senior subjects, I started picking some courses, like I did, ag science and economics accounting. And I felt like getting that extra level of learning in was going to be quite crucial with trying to drive a business rather than just, I didn't want to just come home and just work within the business and just be a piece of the puzzle. I wanted to make sure I was able hopefully able to be the one putting the puzzle together not being a piece, if that makes sense. So going to uni I went to did agri agribusiness I didn't actually really know where it was gonna go or how it was going to go. I just knew that it felt right at the time. Like I can't give anyone advice on how it worked. It just felt the step it was feeling like a step in the right direction. And then COVID kind of was a blessing but also kind of a cruel time as well. So like I was just moved out of college and moved into a share house. It was really fun. We had about three weeks of really good times just had our big house party and everything and then COVID hit and then what we had cases everywhere, it was locked down and then I came home works very heavily in the business mum and dad let me integrate in very well quite, quite hands on. I was quite fortunate that I'd done two exchanges before COVID So I had had subjects up my sleeve, so I didn't have to, I only did three subjects semester, not four, so I had a bit more time. And really cut my teeth, not just in the management side of things, but also just in the operations. And I just the burning desire to continue to learn was there and like I said earlier in the paddock about had some very good people with it. We use consultants and ag agronomists and everyone around. And they just spoke about their studies. And I was like, well, that'd be pretty cool to do something on that. Our sheep business we built from the ground up, we had heaps Merinos years and years and years and years and years ago, we bought back into meat sheep in 2011, from our harvest money that we got in late harvest, us three kids, so we kind of built that whole business up from scratch with Mum and Dad support. So I kind of was a part of that journey from from, from joining. It's not like the big farming business has been around for years and years. So I haven't actually probably I've jumped on the end of it, where the cream is not at the very start where you're the one doing the work on a Saturday or the one before holidays or something. So that's what we did with the sheep business, so that kind of kept us quite grounded in having that experience of seeing the business grow, that's where my master's thesis came from. Because it was an economic thing. We were allowed to send entire sheep to the abattoir that got cut off because of market dynamics and everything. So then that's when the study kind of came from because that economic affect started changing how we did things. And I wanted to really dial into why that was. And so yeah, I did a full blown study on it that was ran for 100 days at home and wrote a what's 80 page report on it. So I'm interested was the was the sheep the passion, or it was more the sheep or a business unit? And you wanted to understand the economics and how? I think that all together?

**Oli Le Lievre** 22:01

Yeah. Okay.

**Tom Coggan** 22:02

Like I wouldn't call myself a sheep farmer. I wouldn't call myself a cattle farmer. I wouldn't call myself a grain farmer. I'd like to say I'm a mixed business person.

**Oli Le Lievre** 22:10

Yep.

**Tom Coggan** 22:10

So I feel like the number the numbers behind the business probably drive me more than the physical task. Like, yeah, I love driving a header, or Yeah, I love driving a planter. But I'm not just doing it in vain. I want to know that if we plant this sorghum crop, we plant this wheat crop, what's going to actually be the gain out of it? We're not just running through the motions until we're 40.

**Oli Le Lievre** 22:31

Yeah. So let's talk about maybe some of the grain side of the business. What I want to ask you first that I found this really interesting. One, well, I probably would have thought you'd be a John Deere person. You're not tied to a colour of a machine?

**Tom Coggan** 22:45

No, I'd say we probably were green blooded for a lot of years there. It's just hard with distance. Like, we've got these two Canadians who are working for us, and they talk about their header's breaking down in harvest and they just lift them out of the field drove 20 minutes down, and they're in the dealership.

**Oli Le Lievre** 23:02

Yeah.

**Tom Coggan** 23:03

So it's very easy to be loyal to that customer base. Whereas it's hard because the dealerships also have staff turnover. And we're not under no illusions of that. And it's sometimes sometimes that happens, it's not their fault, we have it too. So the loyalty of the colours has probably changed. They're all they all have their advantages and disadvantages of what they've got. It's just at the time were pretty heavy. We've got we're pretty heavy with Fendt. We got Fendt headers, Fendt tractors, still versatile tractors, John Deere tractors. Now we've even gone case patriots as well. So we've got a fair, I think we've nearly got every brand under the sun here, but.

**Oli Le Lievre** 23:41

And keeping GreenStar consistent across them all.

**Tom Coggan** 23:43

Yes.

**Oli Le Lievre** 23:45

What were the drivers behind I guess so the the planting rig was what I saw before, but yeah, talk talk to us. Yeah, I think

**Tom Coggan** 23:51

where the decisions come from the change?

**Oli Le Lievre** 23:54

Well, and let's talk about the whole the whole units of what you guys are running

**Tom Coggan** 23:57

Well the machinery side, the the change happened was we had a few computer issues with our John Deere's by hands down for compatibility, and all of the comfort and all those John Deere's are really, really good. I think the Fendt might fit them in comfort now that we've got a new Fendt here, but I think just the driver of them and just changing because we weren't quite happy with what we had. Like the John Deere's there's nothing wrong with them mechanically They were really good. But we just had some sensory issues where you'd be planting and you'd want to go 8k, but they're derating to six. So there's two K's an hour you're losing. And it's that's not the dealerships fault. Like we loved the dealerships. They were doing a really good job. But we just couldn't

**Oli Le Lievre** 24:44

The efficiencies weren't there.

**Tom Coggan** 24:45

Yeah. Oh, and in to fix that redundancy. It's one sensor, and you want to get a mechanic out, bang this 1000 $1,500 Just to get him here to look at it. And then if he doesn't get the right part, the bills just add up and up and up and up and up. So that's when we jumped to versatile, just because they're a simple machine. They've been quite good. But with the versatile situation in Australia, they're not really importing them at the moment because of that whole dynamic going on there. So we had to start looking elsewhere. And that's when we've jumped to the fendt headers, because you couldn't get x nines. Because we've always had this we've had a 680s 90s like all of the John Deere had a brand like headers we've had for years. But so we jumped to these fendt headers because we wanted a class nine machine that had separate a capacity not just a big rotor with more horsepower, because I can s6 Nine is a class nine but or an S 790. But it doesn't have the actual you don't actually get a separator gain, it's no different class eight. So that's when we stepped to these fendts was because that's at the time we could get them. And we put we've gone to we're 80 metres CTF now. We've got three 80 footer fronts and then we got a 40 footer as well. But it's all it was all based just on availability, timing. Like it's not just a singular decision or it's a John Deere I'll buy it.

**Oli Le Lievre** 26:08

Yeah. And you mentioned in there in the paddock as well about, like even just what seemed like small things but revs.

**Tom Coggan** 26:16

Yeah.

**Oli Le Lievre** 26:16

And fuel efficiency.

**Tom Coggan** 26:17

Yeah. Fuel efficiency, comfort. Just just the little things. Like I feel because I'm maybe not in the machine all the time. I definitely am mindful of that. I'm not going to get one of our guys who work for us. Well, once again, guys and girls, we were pretty diverse. Should be would not specific but yeah

**Oli Le Lievre** 26:37

Guys generally

**Tom Coggan** 26:38

Yeah, generally. Yeah.

**Oli Le Lievre** 26:39

Yeah, the crew.

**Tom Coggan** 26:40

So yeah, the crew. Yeah, so the staff I just didn't want to if I don't want to drive it, I shouldn't expect them to drive it. So but then I also have the expectation if I'm giving them a really good machine to drive they should look after it. And to this day most machines we've got a very well looked after. And things like that. So the driver to make sure that if we're going to try to hit an 18 hour planting day they need to be an 18 hour planting day machine. Not just cheap and nasty and yeah, just band aiding it to get the job done.

**Oli Le Lievre** 27:14

The swarm farm and robotics you guys were early ish adopters in the 30 Something units of that literally only yesterday I saw my very first one in a paddock as I was driving down the road there at Northstar which was Yes, super super interesting and and

**Tom Coggan** 27:29

Pretty daunting, hey? when you haven't seen it before.

**Oli Le Lievre** 27:31

Well and it was actually at the end of the paddock turning on the roadside, too. And I walk like alright quickly pulled up, reverse back and then just stopped and watched it for a bit.

**Tom Coggan** 27:38

Yeah.

**Oli Le Lievre** 27:39

Tell me a bit about that. You the the I guess the driver behind brining that in?

**Tom Coggan** 27:45

They the robots arrival coincided with my arrival home. So yeah, it was meant to be Hey, the like dad went to a field day I was had exams on so I couldn't go to this field day we'd just put an order in for big 36 metre Hayes weeder, like yep, we need capacity. So we'll buy a bigger machine. Add it to the fleet it was about 500,000 for this machine. Cost was like it'll be what it'll be it's cameras spray it saves us money and will pay itself off in two years when chemical saving, so it's no problem. Then Dad went to these, this the swarm farm field at Mooney. And there was someone who spoke to him and just was talking about being a slave to the paddock and buying another haze boom. With the tractor. Yes, it gives you capacity but doesn't actually changed the underlying issue, which is time in the paddock, the only way the cameras sprayers work really well is by repetition of the same product, hitting it, killing it getting it at the same time every time. So that's when we saw these robots and we went well, they only had a 12 metre beam then. And we went well, we could go down this avenue, but 12 metres is not going to cut the mustard, it's not going to get the job done. So then that's when dad went to this field day. Andrew could guarantee that we could go to an 80 metre bar, we put the order in for two We rang up that day cancelled the big boom put the orders in for the dad had signed the orders forms before he even got home from the field day and we'd ordered the booms and that was in the July and then in the December we had our first one.

**Oli Le Lievre** 29:25

And how have they gone for you?

**Tom Coggan** 29:26

I would have if when we first got them in the first few months I probably would have said like a five or six. But like I don't I there may be not as close 10 Now you gotta always leave room but I'd say they're an eight or nine out of 10 for us now like they're just they're very good.

**Oli Le Lievre** 29:40

You're seeing huge.

**Tom Coggan** 29:41

Yes. huge gains in like just this summer has been a bit hard. We've had what 400 mil in since the end of November. So when I start of November, sorry. So we've got huge weed pressure issues. We've got contours full of water so that that's been a bit of a challenge with them but they're last summer We had a six week period or six week period there where it was just the robots spraying. And they did the whole 12,000 hectares.

**Oli Le Lievre** 30:04

Yeah wow. Where were you, just sitting by the beach?

**Tom Coggan** 30:07

No, no, I wish nah we were planting crops and doing other things and development work. So building dams. So that allowed us to just, they just operated in the background. So they've just seamless integration into the business. It was quite like I think some of the key points from them was, yeah, it was tough. Getting to know them. Probably take it for granted now having them teaching everyone to not park vehicles on roads where they're moving around. Like at planting, for example, when the robots we don't like we use the robots pre plant now.

**Oli Le Lievre** 30:43

Do you? They just run in front of the sprayer, ah the planter?

**Tom Coggan** 30:46

Yeah. So now we don't even have a machine. We don't even have a spray rigged on in front of them anymore. Unless we have a big rainfall event for planting and you got little weeds coming up. We'll use the big one. But like selfpropelled. But like if we've if we've coming into and we've had decent rain, and then we've got two or three weeks spray, we know before we plant, we'll just hit it again with the robot again, pre plant. So what we've got like you saw today, we had three planters, a spreader. And then we have three guys on logistics. And then you can have the robot two robots going there in front of them. Whereas if you didn't have the robots.

**Oli Le Lievre** 30:55

Yeah. Yeah. What do you reckon the future is for them on your farm here specifically?

**Tom Coggan** 31:26

I think it's going to be tough to automate, like deep ripping, harvesting, planting is going to be it's not going to be hard to do, but it's going to have its own challenges. Like even the robots have their own challenges with spraying with, like, we've got some country that follows the river. It's quite tough to get that area with good GPS reception. Most of its manually steered by human anyway, when you're there, you're not using GPS. So it's a bit hard to integrate that there. So I don't know, I think once this dock and fuel comes out, were they allowed to autofill and can be developed. Like I'd say, you know how I said the slave comment before, the robots have come and they've taken the driving time out of the paddock, but what they haven't taken is the mixing time. So now the next ambition is to get this dock and fill. So you're you attend to it on a routinely basis. And it doesn't matter what you do, that day still happens. They're not sitting there in the middle of the day. And that peak spray win like a really good spray window. Because you're in if you're in the paddock, fixing the water trough, or you're somewhere we got you can't leave like a situation like that. So the robot just has to wait at the moment. Whereas once we implement that Dock and filll we're going to be able to run them that extra bit.

**Oli Le Lievre** 32:46

So I think your farm is fairly cutting edge, I think in terms of management style in terms of the uptake of technology for definitely for what I've seen, but I just think across the board, what does like the future look like here in say, 20 odd years? What do you what do you What do you think if you start to look into the crystal ball of like what's possible in the space of where this farm is heading?

**Tom Coggan** 33:08

I wouldn't say we're probably I wouldn't say we're cutting edge I just we like to adopt things and make sure they work. But I think going forward with the future, I think anything's possible. With ag Tech, I think it's a very cool space, with from drones through to just the drones are cool, what they can do for livestock, I think there's an opportunity brewing with being able to implement wireless fencing with cattle that's coming. I'm pretty keen to have a look at that. But I think the sky's the limit on what's possible, I think it's just gonna be making sure that you don't see the autonomous gear as a silver bullet to take all the problems away and take out the actual what farming is. Farming is dedication, and hard work and also timing. So you can have all the gear and you want, you can have the flashest to flash, just everything. And if you don't nail the timing, the guy down the road who has a 10 foot bar that he pulls with his ute that nearly throws the seeds on the ground will do a better job than that multimillion dollar machine If he beats the timing, so the art of farming is still gonna be there regardless of what happens.

**Oli Le Lievre** 34:16

So what makes you passionate about it?

**Tom Coggan** 34:19

I just it's a lifestyle a little bit. I think it's also I think it's very satisfying to make decisions and following the result right through. I feel like if I was working in a bus within a business that wasn't mine, probably it'd still be quite satisfying, but probably not quite as driven. Like it definitely gets me out of bed every day to make sure like I want to make sure I'm doing this like the robots have been a very big indication of wanting to drive them for success because I see it as a really good forward thinking thing for our business. And I wanted to make sure they worked

**Oli Le Lievre** 34:56

Yep.

**Tom Coggan** 34:57

Because it'd be easy to throw glass, Like throw stones in glass house and say, well, they're not going to work. But I think that I'd like to say they've been like the testament of the robots is that my dedication with them.

**Oli Le Lievre** 35:09

And how important is it do you reckon to remain optimistic in the face of bringing in those new things, which can be clunky, but.

**Tom Coggan** 35:16

I think if you're not trying to progress, you're gonna get left behind. I think this carbon stuff is going to be extremely scary. But I also think it's a very big opportunity, and probably a revolution for the ag sector. That's, it's coming. We don't know much about it three years ago, it wasn't even a conversation. But in the last eight months, it's like, it's like a coffee table conversation now everywhere you go. But I think it's going to be a really good opportunity to revolutionise the industry and actually reward farmers that do the right thing. Like if you're producing clean grain, or clean beef, or whatever it is, you I hope the metrics in which that gets put in place is going to be driven to incentivise good practices.

**Oli Le Lievre** 35:58

What do you find? What like What are the aspects that you think are scary for you at the moment?

**Tom Coggan** 36:02

I think cost just cost of land cost lands quite scary. I feel like if you're first generation farmer, now it's, it's gonna be quite hard to get at scale.

**Oli Le Lievre** 36:16

What about in that carbon?

**Tom Coggan** 36:18

Oh carbon stuff?

**Oli Le Lievre** 36:18

Yeah, scary aspects of carbon.

**Tom Coggan** 36:20

I think I think the carbon stuff is selling your eggs before, you know before they've hatched, I think that's a scary aspect of it, I think you've got to be doing the carbon projects, and everything's gonna be really cool. But I also think that projects you do for $1, today could be worth $5 tomorrow, you just, that's what I find. Hard to get my head around it, I want to be basically at as I see it, right now, I want to be compliant. So I can still do what I want to do. But then hopefully turn that into another revenue stream. So at the moment, we got our grain, we've got our livestock we got our cattle and sheep, hopefully the carbon can become another revenue stream to help offset either get a low interest rate or allow us to get a high premium or get us there. I want to farm without getting discounted at the moment. That's the goal. But then hopefully down the track, it becomes another asset to the business.

**Oli Le Lievre** 37:11

Do you guys have aspirations given, I guess the diversity in your enterprise mix to move closer to that consumer and own more of that value chain?

**Tom Coggan** 37:18

I think I would love to say yes. And I do would like like I will say yes, but I feel like just our geographical location makes it quite difficult, because he's so big with our operation. You gotta be very careful to chase that 5% A few hours away and lose focus on the 95% of the business, if that makes sense.

**Oli Le Lievre** 37:41

Yeah, totally.

**Tom Coggan** 37:42

Lik I think I think there's going to be an opportunity to get that value chain with it. But I think what COVID has showed us that is it can come crumbling down quite fast if you don't build a solid foundation work. Yeah. And being like a fifth generation. I feel like the foundation has been really well laid out for me. I just don't want to jeopardise what has been done prior to me. Based on trying to chase something that hasn't done due diligence or due homework on.

**Oli Le Lievre** 38:13

Is that that big um, I guess, Yeah. Does that come with quite a bit of pressure being the fifth Gen. Farming?

**Tom Coggan** 38:20

Yeah, I feel like, I think in our conversation earlier with before, that I I think the fifth generation presents a very big opportunity that it's, I'm very grateful for where I am, and how I've gotten here. But I also, in turn, want to repay the faith that I've got from Mum, dad, grandparents, and my great grandfather, who's done all the work to get to where we are. So like, the Masters was an aspect that I've done, but I, I did that for my own individual. But I also wanted to make sure I was qualified enough to jump the business the next step.

**Oli Le Lievre** 38:57

So maybe one final question. What's What's something that you're like? Curious intrigued about? Maybe a question you want to throw out into the ether of GRDC, listener land, what's something that you're wondering or trying to work out at the moment?

**Tom Coggan** 39:15

I just feel like for the east coast of Australia, I feel like the lack of knowledge with like, say liquid fertilisers is a big realm of understanding that I wish we were better at or not just liquid fertiliser, but nutrition plant nutrition, I feel like there's a lot of good old heads out there that have known a lot of knowledge. And I just am concerned that we're not going to be able to replenish them because it's an ageing industry, as you know, by all the stats, like we've got young people like you and I coming through, but I just hope that all that knowledge learned can be retained and we can grow on it further.

**Oli Le Lievre** 39:49

Grab that wisdom while it's there.

**Tom Coggan** 39:51

Yeah, because it's pretty important. Like if you could learn how to input your usual inputs in the ground, and you can save 20% That's a pretty decent margin if the whole industry as a whole can ask, like, do that. Not saying it might only be half a percent, but half a percent is half a percent.

**Oli Le Lievre** 40:08

Adds up. Yeah, across the hectares and across the dollars.

**Tom Coggan** 40:12

Yeah.

**Oli Le Lievre** 40:12

Mate. Well, Tom, thank you so much for this afternoon. I know I was a little bit late with getting to you, but fascinating and so cool to see everything from, yeah well, I just think the different kinds of geographies of where you guys are farming within quite a close area, but also that implementation of tech as well and getting the chance to chat. Thank you.

**Tom Coggan** 40:30

Yeah, perfect. Thank you.