David Tropiano - In Conversation

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GRDC investment, traditional lands, grain industry, Mullewa location, land market, farming soils, family farming, share farming, farming challenges, technology adoption, lease arrangements, weather impact, family business, future goals, grain industry passion

**SPEAKERS**

David Tropiano, Oli Le Lievre

**Oli Le Lievre** 00:05



you if you just introduce yourself, yep.

**David Tropiano** 02:22

My name is David tropiano, righto. And where are we? David, well, yeah, located in a little town called Mullewa, or 20 kilometers south.

**Oli Le Lievre** 02:30

Where's Mullewa located in the scheme of WA?

**David Tropiano** 02:35

Yeah, so Mullewa, or is approximately 100 kilometers east of Geraldton, and from Perth, we have probably 500 ks north east.

**Oli Le Lievre** 02:43

We’ll just roll straight into it. David, I guess, yeah. For people, I've been lucky to actually see a little bit more of Western Australia and a bit more of the country in what is a cracking year. But for people who aren't familiar with Western Australia, can you describe the types of soils and what farming is like in this part of the world?

**David Tropiano** 03:00

Yep. So I'll just describe where we are. We farm 20k south. And on that Southern property we have mainly granite and granite loam, sort of soil types into wad jewel gravels. And then we've also got property to the north of Mullewa, which about 5k north, and that's predominantly yellow sand plain into red loams with a bit of red clay in it.

**Oli Le Lievre** 03:19

How competitive is the land market over here? Like for you guys, if as you're looking to expand, whether that's leasing or buying, how? How tight is it?

**David Tropiano** 03:27

reasonably tight. Yeah, you're definitely tight. Probably in schemes to eastern seaboard where you guys are probably not as tight or as hard to get into, but yeah, definitely tightly held, and with the some big players around it is hard to get. Get a bit of a look in with some properties, but you can find, you know, little gems here and there.

**Oli Le Lievre** 03:48

Yeah, size of operations. What does it look like? And what's the township like?

**David Tropiano** 03:52

Town's quite small, so we probably, you know, testing me population wise. But yeah, we'll say a couple 100 people there. I reckon the average scale around the area, we probably range around that six to 7000 hectares cropped, I reckon, in this region. And then there's a couple or there's a handful of bigger players, which would be somewhere between 15 and 30,000 amongst us. Yep.

**Oli Le Lievre** 04:13

And so your family, how long have you guys been farming here for?

**David Tropiano** 04:16

We started farming in Mullewa in early 90s, so about 93 year old.

**Oli Le Lievre** 04:19

Man farming.

**David Tropiano** 04:23

Grandfather, no, my dad came here. So yeah, if we took a step back, my grandfather come out from Italy in 1935 and started farming in Morewa down there. So yeah, started that, and then yeah, expanded through that area there, and probably expanded the wrong time during those high interest rates, and actually probably went backwards and they sold up during that period of time. So then, yeah, Dad was off working other jobs, manually TransWA in Morewa, actually. And then, yeah, this property where we are today come up as a share farm. So, yeah, so share farming here in 93

**Oli Le Lievre** 04:58

what was he doing? Work was before that. Did you say working for TransWA?

**David Tropiano** 05:02

So putting up power poles and transmission lines, yeah, keeping himself busy like that. Yeah, always wanted to go back farming and, yeah, this opportunity come up,

**Oli Le Lievre** 05:10

I guess, as I've looked at your story and what you guys do, a bit of a different way of, I guess, approaching the family farming. But can you talk to me? So this came up as a share farm. So how did your old man get his foot in the door here,

**David Tropiano** 05:22

this property was purchased by investors in Perth, and of that, one of the investors were of relation, so they knew that my dad was, you know, farm background they looked so want to manage it. So yeah, they approached him and said, Would you like to come take this on? So they took this on. And, yeah, share farmed it for about five or six years, and then dating didn't have an appetite for ag anymore, so I said, Would you like to just lease it off us? And he had leased it and then eventually purchased off him.

**Oli Le Lievre** 05:47

Has he ever talked about what it was like to come back into agriculture after, I presume, growing up with that dream, being in and around, thinking that maybe one day you're able to pursue it, to then have it taken away for quite some time?

**David Tropiano** 05:59

Yeah, it was pretty tough for him. It would have been very tough, yeah, starting because he didn't have a lot of gear or with main thing capital behind you, yeah, it was very, very tough and very hard. But I think he enjoyed it was better than the alternative. He'd seen what the nine five job looked like, and didn't like that. So he thought he always wanted to go back to ag and give these kids an opportunity to go into it. And

**Oli Le Lievre** 06:19

so for you was your pretty well, your whole childhood spent on the farm and around this area.

**David Tropiano** 06:24

Yeah, it was, I was about nine when we shifted here. So I did have a little bit of time living in the Morriwa town site. And then also my infant years on the Morawa for farming, Morawa. But majority of my memories are on this farm here, yep.

**Oli Le Lievre** 06:35

And so you guys, yourself and your dad, you went to school down in Perth, and then an ag, course. So agriculture and farming was the way you wanted to go,

**David Tropiano** 06:44

not always, actually, no, I'd want him to do anything but farming, to be honest with you, yeah, I wanted to be a physio for a while. I remember doing work experience that, and realised that this isn't for me. This is Jack. I don't want von anything to do with this. And then then come out, I wanted to probably do a trade. And just through lack of direction, I thought, I'll just do, go to Muresk and study ag for something to do, really. And during that period of time, because I didn't do my TE, I did do a bridging course to get into there. So during that period, I did a year on the farm. And that's sort of where I really enjoyed the farm go. Well, this is pretty good. I think this is sort of where I wanted to go, yeah.

**Oli Le Lievre** 07:22

And so that was not long after high school. You did the year on on the farm, working for your old man. And were you working for someone else? No, I was working for Dad, yep. And then you thought I was not as bad as what people make it out to be. Or, yeah, pretty much.

**David Tropiano** 07:33

I just, yeah. I just really enjoyed it. And I thought, yeah, there's capacity for me to grow here. And yeah, enjoyed the experience.

**Oli Le Lievre** 07:40

And going through Muresk and out the other side was there, was it coming home? Was that the main option for you?

**David Tropiano** 07:46

it wasn't initially the main option. I was sort of going to look for a career elsewhere in the industry. But yeah, I just kept being drawn back to the farm and enjoyed what I was doing here. So ideally, I wanted to often experience something else, get some experiences elsewhere. But yeah, just enjoyed it. Dad. Sort of needed a hand on the farm. And I thought, well, we'll give it a go and come back.

**Oli Le Lievre** 08:06

So when you came back, 2006 or 7, yep. What did it look like?

**David Tropiano** 08:11

A disaster? Yep, oh six was probably the worst year in my memory bank. It was, I think we had about 60 mil of rain for the growing season, and as we had a heap of summer rain, but it was just Armageddon that I was going, my God, what have I done? What am I doing here? It was just bare paddocks everywhere, and we're still heavily in livestock at that point in time. And there was sheep dying, and he had put his sheep down and, yeah, hand feeding every day. It was just, I was going, really scratching my head, thinking, What the hell have I done? Yeah, and

**Oli Le Lievre** 08:42

the farming wise, wer you using GPS and that here?

08:48

**David Tropiano** Not at that stage. No, it was still very much old school, still round and round sort of stuff. And, yeah, the technology hadn't, we haven't caught up with technology at that point in time. Yeah,

**Oli Le Lievre** 08:56

it's amazing how quickly it's changed. I reckon. If you think that's only, well, 20 odd years ago, not even

09:01

**David Tropiano** Absolutely. And it's been a quick uptake from that point onwards. Yeah, so once you've always went to that, then you just progress very quickly from, you know, your auto steer to auto see boundaries, to tram lining, and then variable rates. And, yeah, there's very quick adoption from that point onwards.

**Oli Le Lievre** 09:18

And for you, like, talk to me about your old man's maybe, style of working, and how you came came in off the back of being at university into what was a really challenging year. How do you approach it?

**David Tropiano** 09:29

I was very much just learn just, yeah, very new to it, so you just sort of shut up and pay attention and just do as you're told, really, because, you know, I didn't know any better. In all honesty, had no idea. So yeah, paid attention and try to learn from there.

**Oli Le Lievre** 09:46

Did you find it easy coming forward with ideas of how you guys could grow and do things differently?

09:51

**David Tropiano** over time? I did, yes, yeah, earlier on, not because, again, you're just coming from a point of no real experience, you know, whereas he's lived it all and he's done it so. You do? You take that on board and go, Yep, no worries. You see things that you think you could do to help improve it, but yeah, that point in time, no. Over time, you do and you speak up more. And Dad's been very open with that, like, yeah, taking things on board and Yeah, going with it.

**Oli Le Lievre** 10:15

For you guys, your approach to farming, obviously, owning smaller portions of land, is that right? Or can you, can you explain the business today a little bit?

10:22

**David Tropiano** I share farm with dad, so Sheree and I are a separate business to my dad, but we work together as one unit, and together, we probably own 40% of the landholders, and 60% we lease.

**Oli Le Lievre** 10:35

How have you guys found that? Has it been is that? I'll say like a good number, and I'm asking this from people we chat to, obviously, uh, there's that view of, okay, getting in as a first generation today is really difficult. So being able to, yeah, leverage yourself in different ways. How do you guys make that model work for yourself?

10:54

**David Tropiano** It's through necessity. Because when we started like dad, so he owned nothing, so he, you know, bought little bits and pieces. And then when Sheree and I come in, We own nothing. So you've got to make that lease model work. And to make it work, you need scale and a bit of it. So sort of went down that line to get the scale with it. And if you ask me, What's the idea I'd ideally love to have 60% owned and 40% leased, that's the ideal. That's the goal. Is where I like to get to, where I'd sit a bit more comfortable, because it does give you that leverage to grow your business a lot more, because the hurdle you find with agriculture is capital. And if you don't have a land holding, that's generational or passed down the line, which is accumulated wealth, it's very hard to go to Mr. Bank manager and say, Please, can I have some money to buy the farm next door? And so

**Oli Le Lievre** 11:37

for you guys, how do you structure those leases and those kinds of arrangements?

**David Tropiano** 11:41

Very much so in a long term frame, I generally don't look at leases as short term, because I feel that there's only one outcome with that. If you only get a three year term, you're stuck with your rotations, you're stuck with improving the farm. And I think it's a lose, lose situation for one for me and for also the owner, because I'm only going to do one thing when I go on just going to wall to wall wheat and then get out of there, because you don't know your neighbours might come and undercut you the next lease and you lose it. So we've been lucky enough to deal with good people and build up good relationships where we've got good, long tenures of lease. So until, you know, 10-15, years sort of leases in place. Yeah, wow, that's

**Oli Le Lievre** 12:18

a long time.

**David Tropiano** 12:19

Yeah, it's a very long time. But at the end of the day, we treat it like a sow. They get a very well maintained farm, and then we get the autonomy to do what we need to do to grow that farm to our benefit as well. And

**Oli Le Lievre** 12:32

so when you look at, I'm just picking your brain flat out here, because I find it fascinating. When you guys look at like geographically, have you tried to set up, say, your home block as the central hub, and then the spokes of the other farms out. How do you guys manage that?

**David Tropiano** 12:46

Not by good management, but but by chance, we've ended up with two satellite blocks, one here, and one to the north, and that's just through finding a lease that was suitable for us up the north. And then bits and pieces around it have come up, which we've taken on next week. So we've got nice, big hub there, and a reasonable hub here. The same sort of thing here, same thing. We just picked up little bits and pieces around. But, yeah, not scared to go look outside that area, but ideally, have to say, within a decent travel distance, you know, 30, 40k any more than that, I think it just logistically becomes a bit of a pain in the backside and too much downtime. So ideally, I'd love to keep it just the north and the south and just branch off from there.

**Oli Le Lievre** 13:28

When you look at those areas, does rainfall and soil type and all that vary significantly across it? Yeah, very much.

**David Tropiano** 13:34

So yeah, soil type definitely to the north, as I was saying earlier. If it's more of a sand plain, red loamy sort of soil type. And down where we are Here's more of a gravelly granite loam. And then rainfall. It's only 30k but it's hard to believe the North gets more summer rain and then less winter rain. And then where we are sitting today, which is the south, we'll get more winter rain, but less summer rain. And then on a day like today, where it's 28 degrees. 20 degrees will be here. And if I travel up there, it'll be probably 29 or 30. And it's, you scratch your head sometimes you guys say, How's that possible? But when you think about on the a map, geographically, yeah, well, if you all went another 30k north of that, you know it's going to be another kilometre, another degree warmer again. differences, yep,

**Oli Le Lievre** 14:20

So there is subtle for you at home here, across those 20 years, how have you seen close enough to 20 I'm aging you here? No, those 20 odd years that you've been here, how the seasons changing? Like are you noticing changes and off the back of that, how your practice is adapting to it?

**David Tropiano** 14:36

Yeah 06 and 07, which is my first year back, was definitely a wake up call for the whole district. I think everyone was coming off the 90s, which I'm told, was a phenomenal period in agriculture, where everything worked and went really well. And the early 2000s a bit dry. Then 06-07, was like the real smack in the face. Go. Look. Things are changing, and we're looking back now. I say it was a disastrous year, but. Yeah, it wasn't that bad a year. You look at the rainfall, because last year 2023, we had a far worse rainfall year, but we produced three times the amount of grain on that same rainfall, or at least less rainfall. So we look back, we're very biased with our memories, going oh, 06-07 with disasters, but looking back, we just weren't farming them well. So today's practices that everyone's doing, we are far better place than what we ever have been with conserving moisture, with our summer weeds, seeding early. Big thing nutrition got our nutrition packages better, and our weed control is far better.

**Oli Le Lievre** 15:36

When I was chatting to John Woods, Chair of GRDC, or ex Chair of GRDC, when this is released, he was saying what he sees is like the ability of where the grain industry is now compared to what, even when he stepped into that role in say, 2012 2013 I think it was maybe 2014 like the now, what would have otherwise been a failure of a year, you're actually still getting grain off, off the paddocks, because practices and management are so much better than what it has been historically.

**David Tropiano** 16:03

Yeah, no, I'd agree with that. Yeah, absolutely, yep. And you like to think in 10 years time, we're going to be that much better again at what we're doing. But yeah, we're worlds away from where we were in oh six and oh seven for you

**Oli Le Lievre** 16:13

guys. And back to the family side, so you've got a brother who is now back in so was that always the long term plan for you guys. How far into the future are you planning the business for things like that?

**David Tropiano** 16:26

Yeah. So first part question, probably 18 months ago, Matt sort of broke the idea. It was sort of always floated a little bit, but probably 18 months two years ago, he said, Look, I'm bit sick of what I'm doing here. You know, getting a bit bored with it. How's coming back to the farm? Look and sort of flow the idea with us. And yeah, we sat down and spoke about it for a bit, and we thought, well, yeah, it's actually probably could work out quite well with my dad getting towards retirement age and definitely slowing down on the property, and I'm going to need help on here. So sort of felt there could be a direct transition with Dad stepping out and Matt stepping in to the business and planning to answer your question, when planning was yes, we are looking a fair way forward. Yep, we're trying to looking you look. Planning is very loose, because you have a direction where you want to go, but as you know, the road map changes as you go along with it, because life throws curveballs at you. But basically the Our goal was to have common direction in mind between all three parties, that being my dad, Matt and Elise, and Sheree and I, and just having that common goal at the end of the day, and the direction will be worked out as we go along.

**Oli Le Lievre** 17:34

There's kind of three parts the business, if that's right. There's like the part that you found with your father or your dad, and then there's obviously you and Sheree have your own holdings as well. Yeah. And so how do you make all of that work and prioritize?

**David Tropiano** 17:49

The way we do it is, it's always one, so if we treat it as need be. So for example, if it rained on dad's farm, that's where we start seeding regardless. Doesn't matter where it is, whose it is, and all the operations are done by what's needed, what's best practice for that crop at the time. And the same with harvest. Doesn't matter where we start. It's always one. And we've got little pockets all through where, you know, we'll be harvesting bit of my farm, and then it's the other half is Dad’s farm. So rolls into here so it doesn't, you know, it all works out in the wash, and one year you lose out because yours wasn't seeded first. But then next year you gain. So it's swings and roundabouts, and we very much treat it like that. It's not nitpicky dollars and cents down the end, but otherwise it just wouldn't work. Every year, there's a winner and loser with who got slightly better yields and who didn't. But in the scheme of things, it's all a common direction. So it doesn't matter,

**Oli Le Lievre** 18:41

as we were talking kind of before we started recording, really interesting for you guys, and quite challenging. So can you share a little bit more about how the 2024 season has shaped up so far?

**David Tropiano** 18:53

2024 is, to be honest, is probably the hardest year I've had in farming, just with the all the rain we had, which is what we dream of as a lot of rainfall farm. We thought, Jesus, give me all that rain. Or yeah, we'll grow some thumping crops. But it doesn't work like that, as I've learned. So we had a very dry seeding. Got to the end of May, had 100% the program in start of June, rained and just did not stop raining, so we could not get on a lot of paddocks. So for example, all our southern farm was roughly about four and a half 1000 hectares worth of crop. We sprayed and spread with a plant because we could not put a machine on the paddock at all, and you're looking at weeds choking the crop out, and you just can't get on there to do it. It's very, very frustrating. Led to a few sleepless nights, but yeah, at the end of the day, I'm sure there's more positive negative out of it. There definitely is more positive negative, but it's definitely a different year. Yeah,

**Oli Le Lievre** 19:47

what would you say would be your top couple of learnings from from the year you've had that you'll take forward into next season and the ones after?

**David Tropiano** 19:56

I don't know, I don't we ever going to see another year like this. I suppose we may. Do another 20 years time. I don't know. I don't know. That's an interesting question. What I've learned for one, probably two not, I wouldn't say not sweat about the fact getting, getting on the pace, but maybe just relax a bit more about it. I spoke to a few mates down south who encountered this wet weather all time. He said, What are you worried about? Just it'll be fine. It'll dry out eventually. Don't worry about it. You know, you got water. And he's right. It's 100% right. But it was just frustrating at time, you could see what needed to be done, but you just physically could not do it. So it's, yeah, a bit of a challenging period, that July period for us, yeah, and then

**Oli Le Lievre** 20:36

for me, who doesn't, someone who doesn't know a lot, but so it being this wet still where you were bogged today? Yeah, yeah. We'll let everyone know that one no for yeah, getting bogged today. Does that mean that next year, come sowing time, your profile is going to be fantastic, or is it still up to the weather gods over summer? Oh, I think

**David Tropiano** 20:56

we're definitely getting more moisture in the bank than what we would be going into the next season? Yeah, I'd like to think so. And again, it's a situation I've never been in before. But yeah, you'd have to say there's going to be some moisture left over there, so it's going to be a positive thing in the longer term.

**Oli Le Lievre** 21:11

Yeah, I guess a couple other questions to finish up. But what are the goals for the next few years? For you personally,

**David Tropiano** 21:16

for Sheree, I personally, is just to consolidate more in Ag, where we are, expand a bit more, and, yeah, have a good life, solve somewhere in between all that.

**Oli Le Lievre** 21:28

And for you, what is it about the grains industry that keeps you involved and so passionate about what you're doing?

**David Tropiano** 21:33

I like the challenges of the day to day of farming and trying to solve those issues. So that's pretty much what keeps me going with it now.

**Oli Le Lievre** 21:42

David, thank you so much for having a chat. Was there anything else that you wanted to talk about? No, that's all good. More than happy there No. Thank you so much for having a chat. And I think it's been a really interesting little tour so far of the wheat belt. And yeah, look forward to seeing how the harvest goes for you.

**David Tropiano** 21:59

No worries. Enjoy your time on the west side. Thank you.

**Oli Le Lievre** 22:04

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