# GRDC VIDEO or PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

**Finding your feet as an agronomist**

[00:00:06] **Hilary Sims**  Hi there, I'm Hilary Sims. Being an agronomist is a role with many hats. And while the in-season can be demanding, with the right network and support, it can be hugely rewarding work. In this podcast, we hear from two successful agros that have come to the profession in very different ways. They have their own unique experiences and stories to share and offer up their recommendations for anyone starting their agronomy career. Shortly, we'll hear from Platinum Ag Services senior agronomist Matthew Howell. But first up is Meteora Agronomic Consulting independent agronomist Liz Lobsey. I caught up with them both in April 2024. Liz is an award-winning agro based on the Darling Downs in Queensland. She reckons her career pathway was a little unconventional compared to many.

[00:01:03] **Liz Lobsey** I don't come from a farming background. I am from a rural community in NSW, but my dad was an ambo and my mum is a nurse, so the only connection I had to ag actually was at school and I much preferred plants at high school compared to animals which the rest of the class wanted to do. And I actually didn't go straight into agronomy, I did business at uni in the middle of the millennial drought, because there wasn't a lot of agronomy jobs going at that point, and I kind of just needed to prepare for the fact that it was going to be tricky to get a agronomy job. So I went and did accounting for a few years and then worked on a family run grain storage business, helping run their office and their weighbridge for a few years. And then, as it just happened to be, the universe opened the door to the job that I'm in now. I haven't done agronomy with anyone else. Like I started with Meteora and that's where I've stayed. And I've finished my rural science post-grad while I was working for Meteora.

[00:02:02] **Hilary Sims** So, Liz, what's a typical day look like for you at this time of year?

[00:02:06] **Liz Lobsey** This exact moment in time we are in paperwork mode. This is a bit of the lull period for us between summer and winter crop. We're one of those lucky areas that we do tend to do both, mostly because of irrigation, but we've had quite good rain over the last two months, so there'll be quite a large winter crop area going in, but traditionally a lot of our growers aren't sort of planting until now. So we've had a bit of a lull in between doing paperwork. We will start to ramp off into our winter crop in the next couple of weeks, but we're just finishing off the summer season at the moment, which has been tricky, is probably the best way to put it.

[00:02:41] **Hilary Sims** Tricky? In what way?

[00:02:43] **Liz Lobsey** It's started really well it was looking like it was going to be a really good season for cotton. And then we had some coastal weather that impacted the cotton a bit, but we got good rain. So we had a fairly big late sorghum plant. And then the fall armyworm made an appearance in the sorghum, which is not standard for us. So we've never had that experience before. So there was a fair bit of observing the sorghum in particular, probably a little bit more and a little bit earlier than what we normally would be checking it. So it was just a bit more of a workload come on, because of that than what we normally would. So it was a bit tricky in that the fall armyworm in the sorghum this season was particularly uncharted territory, and we are very limited with what we've got on permits. There was a fair bit of learning going on this season.

[00:03:23] **Hilary Sims** The fall armyworm seemed to take everyone by surprise this year. Speaking of challenges, what were some of the challenges you had when you were starting your agronomy career?

[00:03:33] **Liz Lobsey** The main challenge was my lack of confidence in my ability to do the job. We've had a few checkers come through probably in the last 3 or 4 years at least, that come into the job, for instance, thinking that I know what to expect. But it's not until you actually start doing it that you're actually really understand what is involved with the job. And that really does feed into my lack of confidence when I first started, because I had a preconceived idea of what the job was going to be and where it ends up being, it's completely different. And I guess when I came in to ag 13 years ago, or when I come into agronomy 13 years ago, there still weren't a lot of people doing it that didn't have a connection to farming in some way, shape or form. So there was still a little bit of that stigma, if you will, attached to that as well, whether it was actual or whether it was just my own perception. You never actually really know, but the lack of confidence, and then not actually coming from a farming background that were the biggest challenges, I'd say.

[00:04:30] **Hilary Sims** And to wrap up is what advice do you have for those just starting out?

[00:04:34] **Liz Lobsey** Always listen to what the older heads are suggesting and telling you. They are telling you from past experience and they're not telling you because they like the sound of their own voice. They're telling you because they're trying to pass on that wisdom. So always, if someone is willing to take the time to have a chat with you and give you some advice then you probably should be listening to it. And I guess the other thing is, is agronomy, it's not a job that you will be fabulous at in 12 months or 18 months or two years or three years. You've got to be in it for the long game. It takes time. Because every season is different. For example, I know that the conversation that I had had with my boss this season that, you know, he made comments that in the cotton this year there were things he hasn't seen for a very, very, very long time. So there was no way that I would have had experience in it in like 13 years versus his 30. So not every season is the same. Therefore you're not always going to have the same experience. You might not have an experience in ten years, get to your 11th year of agronomy, and then have something that you've never dealt with before. So it is a long game career. It's definitely not one that you got to know everything in five years, 10 years, 15 years.

[00:05:49] **Hilary Sims** As Liz just commented, becoming a seasoned agronomist doesn't happen overnight. It takes time. Our next guest is a second generation agronomist and has seen the demands of the profession change as farming systems have modernised. Matthew Howell is a senior agronomist with Platinum Ag Services based in Meningie in South Australia. He works in the upper south east of South Australia, centred around Meningie and Malinong. I caught up with him to hear about his career path and recommendations on how to have a successful and fulfilling career. Here's Matt.

[00:06:24] **Matthew Howell** So I'm one of the lucky few. I'm actually a second generation agronomist. My dad was an agro for IAMA back in the 90s as well, so I started out sweeping crops with him when I was eight or 10 years old, going along, caring his sweep net for him, and grew a lot of working in the paddock and working on my own and looking after plants from there. As soon as I discovered how fun and enjoyable the job is, I booked myself in to go to Roseworthy, which is the Uni of Adelaide now and then in 2006 to 2008, and I've been in it ever since. I work with wheat, barley, canola and then I get to do the fun stuff like faba beans, lentils, into summer crop as well, maize, lucerne, sorghum. So very diverse range of crops. And I work with both cropping clients but right through into dairy and pasture systems as well.

[00:07:13] **Hilary Sims** And Matt watching your dad is an agronomist back in the day. What was it like then and how is the profession changed?

[00:07:20] **Matthew Howell** So there's so much that's the same, but so much that's different. Back in the 90s and early 2000, we call them firefighting agronomy. Basically they work out what the problem is and then work out how to fix it. Nowadays, everything's so well planned and budgeted that what changes more often than not is the timing and then tweaking. So we spend four months of the year nowadays planning to work out how quick we can do things, and how hard we can push things based on variables that happen within the season. So nowadays, everything's so structured and budgeted that the changes we might on the run are very minor. Whereas back in the 90s they were still planning the day they was sowing it and working out what pre-ems were using and what crops that were even going to grow. they were still learning how to grow the crops. Now we're just learning how to make them as profitable as possible. But back then, they had a lot more fun with it too. They were able to work things out on the run, they were encountering a new pest every week, that were working and solving a problem and having the big wins, but also having a much higher failure rate in where you can afford to have nowadays.

[00:08:23] **Hilary Sims** And you've got some trials in the ground at the moment. Tell me about those and the benefit there for local growers.

[00:08:29] **Matthew Howell** We've got a bit of a unique situation here at Meningie and Malinong, we've got a community group that has got together and decided that they don't want to travel to do trials. They have started forming partnerships here with my business, obviously Platinum Ag and with the community group, and providing a space and an environment for people to hold trials. So we're trying to attract investment into that area to deal with our localised problems. So we started with GM canola in 2021, and then we've had fungicide resistance and changes within our cropping program very rapidly based on research we're doing ourselves now and attracting to our region. And with our unique situation, the farmers are actually the pub test. We're not allowed to put a trial in, unless it has a direct application to our region, and on that side of it, it means that farmers always are concerned with how it's going to have input in what and how the trial is designed, and because of that, we get so much quicker uptake of the results that are invested in making it work in their business.

[00:09:37] **Hilary Sims** As you know very well, Matt, it can be a really demanding job being an agronomist at points in the season, you're working some pretty long hours, there's a lot of stress. Tell me about the burnout or mental health challenges that can arise from being an agronomist.

[00:09:51] **Matthew Howell** It is a high pressure industry because of the vast sums of money you're dealing with. You are literally the sounding board for these farmers on how they're going to spend their money, how are going to derive their income. And people are very touchy about money, and rightfully so, because it is how they make a living. It is security is food on the table for the family. So it's emotional. People do get worked up at times. For example, today we are about a month behind at traditional break at the moment. Normally farmers have been seeding for weeks for now that we're approaching the finish line. Yet most growers are only just starting and we're forced to seed into conditions we're not used to because we're just got an ongoing dry start. And the emotional pressure that that puts on the farmer because of the uncertainty is massive. And you become a councillor and basically a sounding board for possible ideas that they're having. And because they're not actively engaged in farming at the moment are in a waiting period or holding pattern, they are stressing about it, and they come up with a new idea every couple of days. And by no means are we out of the game with farming process for this year because we're in a pretty reliable area. But it's the stress of the unknown, and that flows down to the agronomists, because you're dealing with a lot of the same questions, but you're dealing with the farmers emotion every day, and their uncertainty just puts a pressure on you. It's not unreasonable, but it does get wearing because an agronomist looks after between 20 and 30 farmers on average, it's pressure.

[00:11:25] **Hilary Sims** And how do you try and strike that balance of work and home life?

[00:11:30] **Matthew Howell** I'm by no means perfect getting the balance right. We work a lot during that in season and it puts a pressure on your family. I've got a very understanding wife, thankfully. For me, it's about getting up with the kids in the morning and yes, my phone is there, but I ignore it a lot of the time until about 7:30 and then every night I make sure I spend between 5:30 and 7:00pm with the kids. I do dinner and bed with them because not only is it quality time with family, it's a shut off from devices and from farmers problems. There's nothing to clear the mind like a toddler tantrum over dinner. Then I can snap back into work mode at around 7:30pm after doing a bedtime routine, do another hour if the workload demands it. If not, I'll leave my laptop in my backpack. The problem with what we do now is we're so accessible. Back when I was a kid watching dad do it, he had between 6:00 every night and about 830 every night to make all of his phone calls, because he was inaccessible the rest of the time. Yes it put two hours of pressure on you at that end of the day. But it was only two hours, the rest of the time is yours to shut off, to think about whatever you want. You weren't connected to a device, so for me, disconnecting for a couple of hours a day is what I try to do. Not always great at it.

[00:12:44] **Hilary Sims** And to wrap up, Matt, what advice do you have agros just starting out?

[00:12:49] **Matthew Howell** To be a successful agronomist, you need to have people around you who will support you but challenge you. So from day dot build your network. Don't be afraid to go up and ask the oldest, most senior agronomist in the room. Don't be afraid of them because they're all willing to help you, even if they wear a different shirt to you. So some of my agro connections coming up, all had different shirts to me. I still ring a few of these guys, and some of them are working for competing companies now. But the other side of it is give back as much as you can. So don't be afraid to answer what you see as silly questions can be important for someone else's development, not to mention it just builds trust. Give back to the younger agros or give back to senior agros. Some of them will come to you for a sounding board and an opinion because you're a set of fresh eyes, give them an honest answer. Don't be afraid to.

[00:13:47] **Hilary Sims** That was Platinum Ag Services senior agronomist Matthew Howell. And before him was Meteora Agronomic consulting independent agronomist Liz Lobsey. More information on this topic can be found in the description box of this podcast or online at GRDC.com.au I'm Hilary Sims and you've been listening to a GRDC podcast.