Maree Crawford - GRDC In Conversation

Tue, Oct 10, 2023 9:50AM • 35:23

**SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

biologicals, products, industry, plant, elders, people, love, soil, oli, grains, young, agriculture, today, opportunity, farmers, information, focus, great, pac, research

**SPEAKERS**

Maree Crawford, Oli Le Lievre

**Oli Le Lievre** 00:00

Welcome back to GRDC In conversations. Each week we're sitting down with different people who have had a contribution in various areas and parts of the Australian Grand industry. Today. I'm joined by Maree Crawford, who's a Technical Services Manager with Elders. She's based in Toowoomba, in Queensland joining us on a public holiday after we could say Grand Final weekend of some sorts of tough day to be a Queenslander. But other times there's lots to celebrate. Welcome, Maree. It's great to have you.

**Maree Crawford** 00:27

Thanks, Oli. Yes, it is great to be here. Even though we are a bit heartbroken today.

**Oli Le Lievre** 00:32

I think we'll push on and get by.

**Maree Crawford** 00:36

Absolutely.

**Oli Le Lievre** 00:46

A tough day, but we could say the real winners are Rubgby League and AFL. But it just doesnt wuite ring the same does it.

**Maree Crawford** 00:48

No, but you're absolutely right. It is they are the winners.

**Oli Le Lievre** 00:49

Now, I'd love to start off. I'd change this around. But in every podcast, we're trying to ask a few different questions that have the same questions to a few different people just to see what they answer with. So I'd love to know just kicking off with something that you've got on your bucket list.

**Maree Crawford** 01:03

My bucket list is to go back to the Kimberley. I absolutely love the Kimberley and WA Yeah, I think it's a place where it's there's no other place on earth. For me love the Territory, and particularly the Kimberley though, and Ayers Rock. I've not been to Ayers Rock yet.

**Oli Le Lievre** 01:18

That'd be amazing. It's on mine too. You've been around the grains industry for I think, the majority if not all of your professional working life. But what is your favorite grain based dish?

**Maree Crawford** 01:29

Favorite grain based dish? Well, I'd have to say sweet corn from a grain base. Yeah, It'd have to be sweet corn.

**Oli Le Lievre** 01:38

Good answer. Who would be three people you'd love to have around for a meal?

**Maree Crawford** 01:43

Wow, Well Wayne Bennett, definitely. He's a really interesting guy. And I've had a little bit to do with him. And he would be number one. Roger Federer, Oh so much respect for Roger Federer. And my Grandma. If she was here today, I'd love to have my Grandma around the table with me.

**Oli Le Lievre** 01:59

That'd be special. Tell me a little bit of a sports theme. That's a you're mad sports person?

**Maree Crawford** 02:05

Yes, I was rared amongst a whole family of boys, big Catholic family. So a large family and 10 Brothers. So yes, we always played sport. As young people. We always played sport. And Mum and Dad always thought that healthy bodies led to a healthy mind. And certainly we contributed to that in terms of the Healthy Body piece.

**Oli Le Lievre** 02:26

That's a very good outlook. And I reckon 11 of you running around definitely could make the most of that. Now, I think that probably ties nicely. With so many siblings. What was your first ever job?

**Maree Crawford** 02:37

It depends. I mean, I was born into agriculture. But if you're talking about my first paid job, it was a nurse's aide. And that was outside of high school. Oh, yes. So that was the mutual Hospital in Queensland.

**Oli Le Lievre** 02:50

There you go. So I'd love to know, tell me a little bit more about your childhood, your siblings, whereabouts you grew up, you're obviously on a farm?

**Maree Crawford** 02:58

Yeah, born into agriculture, Mum and Dad, we started off at Wellington, New South Wales, where they, they had a property and then moved into Queensland and one after the other. There was a whole heap of siblings born on the second eldest of 11, and had a whole heap of brothers to contend with. We moved around a lot, I guess, Dad, sold his place, sold the farm. And then he went managing farms or big stations, they were in those days for AA company, AP Company sorry, Australian Pastoral company in those days it was. So I was born into that difference between, I guess, a combination of livestock production as well as grain production. That's what I experienced in my younger years and a lot of sheep as well. I spent some time on Nundu and Cubby Station as a young kid. And certainly my last stint was on on Amby Downs, and then dad went back into his own holdings. And yes, he stayed there until he passed away and the property went to the eldest three boys. So I dipped out there. And that's why I'm always very passionate about that secession planning. I talk about that a lot. When I talk to women in agriculture groups, talk about the importance of sucession planning around those. We're females. It's not just about gender, it's about whose the right person for the right job.

**Oli Le Lievre** 04:16

Absolutely. And that's something that we've had a few different conversations on as well. What happened with the other siblings? What pathways did they go down?

**Maree Crawford** 04:23

Amazing. Some of them are still in agriculture. 50% of them. Others are fairly high up in big corporations. One is with Queensland Rail. And the other two that are not in agriculture are pretty much in the transport industry, I guess you would say, managing trucking companies.

**Oli Le Lievre** 04:41

Were you guys traveling around with your Dad while he's doing the stations or did you go set up a home base somewhere else?

**Maree Crawford** 04:45

No, we're very fortunate. We all went to boarding school. I went to boarding school in Toowoomba, in Brisbane and as the the boys or went to Downlands in Toowoomba.

**Oli Le Lievre** 04:55

My golly, would have definitely kept the boarding schools happy to see your family coming through the gates.

**Maree Crawford** 05:00

In those days Oli, I don't think it was quite as daunting from a cost perspective.

**Oli Le Lievre** 05:04

No, not at all. Tell me a little bit more about your first jobs as the second oldest kid, you were thrown right in the deep end, needing to help out on the farm from a young age.

**Maree Crawford** 05:15

My first job was for myself, actually, my brother and I, we had a passion for it. And he was one of the ones that was left out of that sucession plan. And so what we did is we together we bought a property for ourselves. And we're still in partnership today. Plus another brother today. But we went and worked for ourselves. And then I married, went to work for Pacific Seeds where I was for 20 years, I wanted to pursue my own passion in which was plants so I always had an interest in plants. And I was able to do that, you know, spending 20 years at Pacific seeds through the research arm and the breeding arm and then the commercial arm as well.

**Oli Le Lievre** 05:55

Tell me a little bit about that. Did you go and study at university? Or was this just it was at a job that you stepped into and it evolved?

**Maree Crawford** 06:01

It was a job that I basically did step into for sure. And I think it was because I, I had people skills, good people skills, I guess that was what they were looking for. So someone that could communicate with farmers and could also communicate and educate other members of the Pac Seeds team and work with the breeders, work with such a wide multidisciplinary team, I guess. But I quickly worked out that I needed some formal qualifications. And that's where I studied externally. And did I a bachelor of agribusiness and agronomy.

**Oli Le Lievre** 06:32

And how did that evolve for you? That was on the side of working for Pac Seeds?

**Maree Crawford** 06:36

Yeah, that was on the side. And I had a really good, had some great mentors. The breeders were absolutely amazing. At Pac seeds. Peter Stewart and Neil Muller and Errol Courson and Alan Scott. And they encouraged me to do even more study because I had a lot to do with sorghum. My passion was grain sorghum and forage sorghum. While I was at Pac Seeds, and I end up doing a PhD, took me nine years to finish it. I finished it last year with Elders and it was started, you know, prior to coming to Elder's, it was something that I really wanted to do, as there was so much we worked on in that sorghum space. And one of the real things that I think bought a lot of value was to breed a sorghum that could actually mitigate nematodes in the soil. So basically, it didn't kill them, but it impacted on their reproductive system. So they basically live their life cycle out. And then that basically, was the end of them, that lifecycle didn't continue. That was fitted into the horticulture industry. And then I, from that, I gained so much knowledge working with Monash University, the Monash University researchers, and Pac Seeds breeders, and I really gained a lot from that. And I guess, because of that livestock background, I wanted to look at, I recognized that there was a switch gene and saw them that way, you could switch on genes that produced toxic compounds within the plant. And so I went studied that a lot more. And that's what I did my PhD on.

**Oli Le Lievre** 08:08

What benefit Did you find doing the extra study both at your, your bachelor in the early days, but then deciding to that PHD ? how did that impact you professionally?

**Maree Crawford** 08:16

I certainly was recognized in the industry for it, that's for sure. But I think more importantly, you know, my focus was always around, giving good advice to growers and having a really solid, profitable industry as such, and, you know, the advice that you could actually bring the different conversation that you could actually have, because of the knowledge that you had, at a different level, that more technical knowledge, and the understanding and the implications of how plants work and how the environment impacts on plants and things you can do to mitigate the downstream effects on livestock. That was really I think that was the biggest outcome of that.

**Oli Le Lievre** 08:54

Has your passion changed over this stage of your career is, as you've been exposed to different things, as you've learned more as it stayed quite consistent throughout?

**Maree Crawford** 09:02

Pretty consistent Oli, in not necessarily all about plants and the like and research, but definitely research I suppose, but not just on plants. The information and the knowledge and that I gathered from doing that study is now led me to enter this field of biological products and how they work within a plant and fit within a plant to improve efficiencies and yield potential for farmers. So it's really the underpinning thing here. You know, the catalyst is still about making sure that we've got a strong viable industry and researching and providing some really solid agronomic information and technical information to growers so that they can make more informed decisions and do things more efficiently and more effectively.

**Oli Le Lievre** 09:48

Yeah, can you tell me a little bit about biologicals? I've started to hear more of in the last little while, but can you just tell me a little bit more about them and how you came to be involved and understand more about them?

**Maree Crawford** 09:58

Yeah, it's a real passion of mine. And again, as I've said before, it underpins what underpins all of this stuff for me is about making sure that we're providing growers with the opportunity to be really profitable and continuously profitable. Because if they are, then we've got, you know, a strong industry. Without farmers, we don't have partners don't have a jobs and harvest wouldnt either. In terms of the biologicals, I guess, you know, at any given day, our commercial team in Elders, would get a number of companies coming through that have products that they want to talk to Elders about that they believe have a fit in the agricultural industry. However, there's not a lot known about them. But from an Elders perspective, we want to make sure that the information that we put out there is, is well understood, and that we understand it as advisors that we really understand it as well. And then we're getting the most out of the information that we're given that we're not just looking at a glossy brochure, and believing everything that we read. So what it's led to is, for the last five years, I've been researching a number of when I say a number, it's an excess of 400 products we've tested out at the Tosari Research Centre. And what we've uncovered is they all work to different degrees and in different ways as well, they all have different functions within a plant as well. It's not to say that if something doesn't provide you the result this year that you throw it out, and they don't end think that they don't work, what I found in my research was that they do work. But it's about how do you extract that the best out of it, and how do you get that efficiency and effectiveness out of that product. And, you know, it's really simple when you think about it, we've started to use co-factors and layer products, mixed products in terms of insecticides, and fungicides and herbicides. So it stands to reason that we would then start to apply that methodology to nutritional products as well. What I found was that these products will never be at this point in time, through my research, they're not going to be standalone products, but they're definitely going to increase the efficiency of the synthetics. So you need the combination of the synthetic and the biological to get a greater efficiency from your synthetics these days, it's a really interesting space, a lot of conjecture around it. And the only way forward is to look at data. And we all live and die by data from a research perspective. That's what we make our decisions on. And that's what good advisors and good farmers make their decision around, data. we found that there are a number of products that definitely add value. And in a worthwhile putting into a program, they've got to be part of a program. They're not standalone products.

**Oli Le Lievre** 12:49

I think that's a big part of the discussion, isn't it, it's not a black and white, it's kind of quite a gray where these things fit in. One thing I found really interesting to learn it was only a couple of years ago, but I'd spent a few years and doing a bit of sewing and I'd never ever put two and two together that the inoculant we were putting on beans, Fava beans down here in Victoria was actually a biological. And when someone told me I was like, oh, and I wonder how often that actually happens, where you just think, Oh, I'm just putting a product on blablabla. But actually understanding that it's a biological, it's not a synthetic, it's all this is the benefits of it, Is actually not getting through to the I guess the applicators or the people actually on the ground? because you just see it as another product your kind of coating the seed with,

**Maree Crawford** 13:28

I think we take so much for granted. And what I found was, what we don't know enough about is the impact of root exudates as well. And compatibility, the root exudates and how that impacts on compatibility of the product, getting it into the plant as well. So there's some really good information there that we found. And if you think about root exudates, their primary function is that it's their defense, it's part of a defensive trait mechanism. And so that's there to protect the plant.

**Oli Le Lievre** 13:54

And so can I just jump in there? Maree, can you please tell me what is a (i'm even going to struggle trying to say it) a root exudate?

**Maree Crawford** 14:01

Root Exudate. So root exudate is a substance that's exuded from the root hairs. So that's basically it can be waste product, you know, from it can be carbohydrates and different other sugars and that actually feed good microbial bacteria in the soil and fungi in the soil. So yeah, it has a has a twofold effect. It can overcome pathogens within the soil. Some of them can overcome pathogens in the soil. And that's why we see these, what we call a Lilia Pathik impact, where we see yellowing, if we've planted say canola that doesn't host them. So the root exudates of canola actually are not very good if we want to grow a grain sorghum crop straight after in the same field. And that's because it doesn't host spam and it doesn't increase the microbial colonies within the soil. So it doesn't contribute to that soil health perspective from building microbes. But what it does do it takes out pathogens. It can alleviate crown rot, for instance in wheat, but a lot of these new biologicals, the, the New Age, modern biologicals, are manufactured in, I guess, formulated very differently, so that they are a lot more compatible with root exudates. And become symbiotic with the plants, though they colonize within the roots of the plant. And there's a symbiotic relationship between the plant and, and the product, it feeds it. And then in turn, the microbes in the product protects the plant as well.

**Oli Le Lievre** 15:35

So what are maybe some of the trends or observations that you're seeing and expect to see in the biological space in, say, the next five to 10 years?

**Maree Crawford** 15:43

I think we're going to see a greater uptake of it. Our biggest drawback right now is cost. As a cost of production. Some of these products are just not, they're just stay out of the ballpark, if you're growing a really high value crop, such as horticulture, even cotton, for example, we're doing a lot of work in cotton right now with some of these biologicals, so if you're growing a high value crop, it's a no brainer to have a look at what fits what's compatible with what crop group and what products and work them into a program. They're going to become more affordable. I believe, as we get the uptake, as it increases it like anything, I believe, you know, it will become more affordable to be used in mainstream broadacre. But right now, that's the biggest drawback.

**Oli Le Lievre** 16:28

Are there's some short term trade offs and compromises that people are needing to take in order to transition their business to utilizing more biologicals? But also, I guess, creating that opportunity that as new technologies as the accessibility to the different products comes up, that they can be in a position to use them? like is this, I don't want to say the word short term pain, But is there yeah some of those trade offs that need to be really thought through strategically to see what does that rotation, What does our farming system look like in X number of years?

**Maree Crawford** 16:58

I think, Yeah, most definitely. And there are some products out there that won't cause them too much grief, right now that do fit into the broadacre system. And that's part of the work that we've been doing at Tosari. And some of these are, these products are around about that four to $5 a hectare to get, you know, a tonne to the hectare, you know, 800 kilograms to a tonne, (Public Holiday) increase in yield. And I think, you know, it's not just about that, though, it's about thinking about the system more holistically. And I know it's we get paid and our clients get paid based on yield, you know, what they produce, but it's about some of the intangibles that we don't think about. It's about that impact on soil health, longer term soil health, it's about, you know, building good carbon chains within the soil itself. And the great thing about carbon is that it's a carrier for these products as well. So it increases and adds to the efficacy of uptake of some of these biologicals, as well. So it's an important component. So I think it's about that longer term view, you know, the wider picture, it's not just about the yield, I'm going to get off this paddock today. It's about how does this fit into a program for me so that I'm continually going to be improving this paddock to have increased yield year on year. That's true building better soils and more robust soils.

**Oli Le Lievre** 18:22

And I love on your LinkedIn profile, you need to get it up here, but your tagline right at the top, I'm gonna have to get it up in front of me here. So I don't stuff it up here, Maree. But well, you might be able to tell me off the top of your head. But it's about pretty well, the whole of life is sustained by the top six inches, we are in existence to a six inch layer of our topsoil that underpins so much of what you do, and so much of your thinking?

**Maree Crawford** 18:45

100%. And I've always been a strong advocate for when I train agronomists as well within our own organization here. My ethos in my theme has always been around soil drives productivity, it's the factory that drives productivity. And if your factory isn't humming on eight cylinders, then you're certainly not reaping the benefit that you could be about getting it into a better condition and getting it humming and having it healthy.

**Oli Le Lievre** 19:14

Do you think that the conversations are really and it probably ties into that biological piece where we've are now starting to look up more and more scientists. So like, obviously, they've always existed in and around farming, but there has been a real focus potentially on say, the chemistry side, but now we're actually looking at that the biology of how everything actually interacts, and how do we utilize the strength of nature and what's existed in those ecosystems to actually go how's that underpin our farming systems and practices?

**Maree Crawford** 19:39

I think it's an exciting space, but I'd like to see a lot more funding, you know, if GRDC going to be funding some projects, I think this is a major area that needs to be right on the middle of the table, because I think this is where we're going to get our next productivity going from. I doubt that we're going to get it in a lot of crops. We're not going to see it come from genetic gain, but we're definitely gonna see it come from better practices. And, and this is part of that, this is part of that story.

**Oli Le Lievre** 20:07

I want to step sideways because I think we've got a lot that we can delve into and flesh out about your Elders days. But I'm, I'd be really interested to know that decision to leave Pacific seeds, you spent 20 years with one company, which is i nearly want to say unfathomable, I'd probably most definitely will not do that in my whole career. But what was it like? And what spurred on the decision to move? And who did you consult going through that? I'd love to know more about that process.

**Maree Crawford** 20:33

It was a very agonizing decision, for a few reasons. I guess I you know, you get into this comfort zone, you know, your staff, you've got it down pat. You know that you're going to always be reasonably successful in whatever you do, because you know, your stuff. But I realized there was a lot I didn't know, and there was a lot that I really wanted to do. And to work for someone like Elders that are just so multifaceted, was going to give me that opportunity. But it took me three months to give them an answer to give Elders an answer, to be honest. There was a lot of too-ing and fro-ing. And I had a lot of very close associations with Pac Seeds from a staff point of view the people and still do to this day. But not just that, it's about industry. You know, I have a broader view. Although I, I felt very fulfilled at Pacific Seeds, because we were part of a team that was really hitting some goals. But once you've done it, you've done it. And there wasn't the opportunity to really expand on that. Any Elders offered me that opportunity, I guess after the three month wait when some pressuring from them to give them an answer, I said, Yes, I'd come across. And wow it's been a ride as well.

**Oli Le Lievre** 21:48

And I was gonna say it because some people could fall into the default of saying, Oh, I've never looked back. Did you look back in those early days and go or have I made the right decision? It was quite comfy, knowing every system, all the processes, all the people, it's a daunting new world out there.

**Maree Crawford** 22:03

The first week, I've had so many phone calls to my mentors and people I was close to in the industry, I really questioned if I'd made the wrong decision. Because there was just so much it was overwhelming. It was, it was a bit like the TARDIS to be honest. Open doors and there's so much in front of you. And it was very overwhelming. But, I had some really good people within Elders with the great management team who had a very strong focus and a very strong vision on where they wanted to take the company and what my role was. And they steadied that ship and sorted me out pretty quickly as to what their expectations were. And it wasn't to conquer the world, like I thought I needed to do, and to just put one foot in front of the other and, you know, take every quarter as a as a stepping stone. And pretty much that's where I landed. And I haven't actually looked back since I adopted that, you know, that process that method of going forward. And I'll still practice it today.

**Oli Le Lievre** 23:02

I'm really interested in this. Can you talk me through a little bit about about that? So do you break down year into like, into quarters? But then like, how did you because I've, it's something that I will say I struggle with in the sense of, you can think of all these all the things we want to do. And this is what we could do. But then when you actually start to write things on paper, you think, oh, that's like a 10 year plan I've got in front of me, but how did you actually get back in control and reduce that overwhelm to a state where you could actually one; deliver what the business needed, but two; actually kind of reduce the anxiety and stress on yourself?

**Maree Crawford** 23:35

Yeah, I guess it was, I thought back about to one of my great mentors. And one of the greatest losses, I guess, to the agricultural industry was Bob Hansel, Dr. Bob Hansel, who was a sorghum breeder for the DPI. And he always said to me, "If you've got a big problem, you break it into small pieces". And I always recognize that was probably the best advice anyone has ever given me in my whole entire life. And I talked to young Agros and I talked to you know, farmers about that same methodology today. And so that's what I have to do so quarters for me, give me, don't take me out that far that I can you know, I'm going to lose control, because we work seasonally, obviously. So the quarter piece really fits in nicely with seasons, it fits in with workloads, it fits in with what's achievable. And gives you,keeps you focused for some short term goals.

**Oli Le Lievre** 24:29

Have you found that you've had to juggle that being obviously you you're very involved in the summer, grains industry, but also how involved are you in the winter as well? Because then that would all of a sudden create quite a busy year.

**Maree Crawford** 24:42

I love having a crack at my southern counterparts. I always tell them they only work six months of the year. And I love doing that too. And I tell them that there's no rest for the wicked up here. We continue to work season after season you know our Summers roll into winter, and winter rolls back in Summer for us. So I think from a winter perspective, you know, we're an opportunity cropping, it's a winter crop for us up here, is an opportunity crop. And that gives us the time to then really focus on some of those other things in particularly the research. So if we look at what's going on, you know, what Elders are contributing to in research terms at Tosari, the biggest majority of our work is done in winter out there. Which fits in really well with the industry as well, I've got some time, you know, the industry has got time to actually come and have a look at what you're doing. Are they really interested in what we're doing? You know, Our field days are really successful. And it's just a good time to be able to do it. And it's the most efficient way and effective way to do it.

**Oli Le Lievre** 25:42

And I'd love to know, well, we've got the Tosari piece, But you also talk quite a lot about this call it "sustainability", but the future of the industry and seeing the industry continue to thrive. A huge part of that is the next generation and the next gen of Agros. You, I presume, you spend a lot of time with the I'll say the young up-and-comers and the next gen?

**Maree Crawford** 26:03

Yeah, I You're absolutely right. And there's some real talent out there. It's about how do we nurture that? And how do we create that next generation of specialists as such. Because that's what we're in danger of losing is those specialists Oli, and that's what really worries me the most. You know, if someone said to me, what keeps you awake at night? that would be the thing that keeps me awake, is worrying about where is our next generation of specialists going to come from? And what I mean by that is, I was really fortunate to come up underneath some really good researchers that worked in the public system. And as I mentioned before, and also in the private system. The issue we've got today is that you could name on one hand, those specialists that work in the public system today that are providing really good mentorship to commercial agronomist and commercial advisors. And so they providing might be providing lots to PhD students and people within their own organizations and universities. But these guys in my era they came through and they were the ones that were providing just as much mentorship and leadership taught us a lot about leadership skills in the like into the commercial arena, And that's where we were getting it from. So now there's a lot more focus on the commercial business, businesses filling that gap. And I'm not sure that we're doing that, well.

**Oli Le Lievre** 27:29

Do you have a solution for it? Or like we've given the audience that we get on this podcast, what would be your ask or something that you'd like to put out there?

**Maree Crawford** 27:40

I'd like to see a lot more scholarships for young people. You know, we have some good ones. But I don't think we have enough of them. Alot more opportunity for young people to who are not bought up on the land either, who are not ingrained in agriculture, you know, like I was to start with. There's a lot of talent out there. And the reason I say that is that we're going to need those young people. Because modern agriculture is so different, we're going to need people that are very differently focused and have a lot broader skillset or different skillset, particularly in that technical area that digital Ag-Tech is a classic example of that. So I think I would love to see a lot more focus given, I know that Elders, in their graduate program, that we focus on that a lot. Making sure that you know, if there's someone that that's going to be an absolute walk-up-start as such, based on their attitude, we need to give them that opportunity, regardless of the fact that they are might be a town kid or a city kid or whatever, you know, might have had that don't have that ingrained Ag in them. And I always say internally here, I can teach skill, but I can't teach well, and that's why I'm saying there are a lot of young people out there with a lot of the right attitude, the right mental attitude, the right attitude to resilience, that could bring a whole lot of value to the industry. And we shouldn't forget about that. We talk about making sure that, you know, we've got up and coming young people in agriculture. And I've actually heard people say, Oh, well, if they haven't got an agricultural background, it's probably a waste of time. That's the biggest mistake we could ever make.

**Oli Le Lievre** 29:20

So do you think rather than than the applicants changing it's us as an industry, as businesses as participants that need to actually do the changing? and create that space and opportunity and go okay, well, it's going to be an investment of a few years to get someone across the lingo and up to speed on all things agriculture, but long term, they're going to be a much larger asset than the alternative.

**Maree Crawford** 29:42

Oh, 100% Oli, I talked about the importance of data before. Alot of these young people are just absolutely wizards with data. And we're going to need more and more of those. You know we talked to the digital ag tech, the digital platforms and they're employing these types of people because they have to, they need those data scientists as such. I just think that we need to have a different approach and embrace people for that talent that they could bring and look at them as an investment, not a cost.

**Oli Le Lievre** 30:13

The last part I'd like to touch on with you, is around your involvement outside of your day to day role, you've been involved in various areas, including as chair of the Australian Summer Grains Conference, how have these roles benefited you in in your career?

**Maree Crawford** 30:27

They've taught me a lot. They've taught me how to manage groups of people, number one. Diverse groups of people with different personalities and there's some big egos in our industry. And my role as the Chair in the Summer Grains Committee really, is to keep that nice, even balance and make sure that everybody's humming and working, you know, synchronously together, and harmoniously together. And even in a workspace, it's the same thing. It's given me those leadership skills on you know, how to lead a team of people and how to communicate really well with people. It's interesting, it's taught me as well what makes some people tick. And how to tap into that and get the best out of them. I think that's some of the big learnings for me, is really about how to work really well as a group of people towards a common goal and to achieve that goal, because it's all about success. It's, for me, it's all about making sure that our industry is successful.

**Oli Le Lievre** 31:22

And the bigger goal of industry success, what does it look like for you day to day? at the moment in the areas that you're really influencing?

**Maree Crawford** 31:30

Oh, number one is farmers, making sure that, as I said before, making sure they're successful. Because if they're not successful, then we're in trouble. And it's about making sure that our people are across the latest information that they need to be across that they're able to confidently and technically utilize that efficiently. And it's a soft skills bit as well, Oli, we tend to talk to people about how much they know about being an agronomist, one of the biggest things they need to know is how to communicate with a farmer. And so their soft skills are really important. So you know, I teach agros how to communicate with growers, and yeah, we problem solve on, you know, what might be going on here with a grower when something doesn't go right. You know, so it's about understanding how to put all the pieces of the puzzle together. And it's not just the Elders people as well, I get into conversations in lots of different places with lots of young people as well, in different coloured shirts that that want to have that conversation as well. What do you think? how should I do this? And it's about being that industry mentor, being seen as an industry mentor, that can bring some value to a whole range of people.

**Oli Le Lievre** 32:39

Yeah. And I think that role that you play to so many others, that when we were looking for people to come and have a chat before as part of the GRDC In Conversations, you came straight up. And it was someone we should definitely get on early in this next series, because you're someone which I know, lots of people in the spheres that we've been chatting, look to in terms of well, who's a great representative of the industry, but also who's the type of person who's had a career which can help others learn, can inspire them and can pass on that information for how people can actually pursue opportunities for themselves, both inside the farm gate, but also wherever it might be that they want to have involvement in the grains industry.

**Maree Crawford** 33:16

Yeah, and thanks for that. But again, I'll go back to it. It's about the mentors that I had. The people that mentored me way, way back, showing my age now. But the people that mentored me in my green era, such my younger years, I'm the product, I am today because of them.

**Oli Le Lievre** 33:34

And so I've got one final question, You say in your green era, but you've still got a lot to contribute, and we've all got so much to gain from you. But just personally, I would love to know what gets you out of bed in the morning to do what you do?

**Maree Crawford** 33:46

I just love it must be mad. But anyway, I I just love that day to day diversity, the wide variety that's on offer in agriculture is an absolute smorgasbord, isn't it? I mean, I can go from talking to an advisor or an agro in a paddock, having a look at something, to jumping in a tractor with a farmer and physically experiencing it myself as well, to driving to Brisbane and sitting in a boardroom, you know, talking to the decision makers of big corporations that we deal with. Yeah, but I think it's about keeping it real. You know, keep it real. We understand that there are lots of challenges out there. And and I think having some empathy, empathy is a major thing, being very empathetic and having some understanding of what is happening here. And being inquisitive, having an open mind and being inquisitive about what's the solution? you know, if we've got a problem, what is the solution? And that goes for people as well. You know, if you're, you know, creating a problem, then you need to be part of the solution. I've always said that.

**Oli Le Lievre** 34:48

I agree wholeheartedly with you there. And I just wanted to say, Maree, thank you so much for coming and having a chat I know you've spent what has been maybe a little bit more of a tougher public holiday than others. My condolences to you on the football, but we know that agriculture and farming goes on and they will always be next year and gosh,

**Maree Crawford** 35:08

Yes, they definitely will be.

**Oli Le Lievre** 35:10

The good thing about football cards in Brisbane is they've got good young sides and a great future so fingers crossed for you. But thank you so much for joining us for a chat.

**Maree Crawford** 35:20

Thanks so much Oli. It's been a pleasure.