Roy Hamilton - GRDC In Conversation

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**SPEAKERS**

Roy Hamilton, Oli Le Lievre

**Oli Le Lievre** 00:09

G'day I'm Oli Le Lievre and welcome to GRDC in conversation, I'd first like to acknowledge the traditional land on which the podcast is produced down here in Geelong, and acknowledge the Wadawurrung people as the traditional custodians on the lands that we meet. I'd also like to extend those respects wherever you listen to the podcast, and acknowledge the traditional custodians on the lands where our podcast guests are joining us from. We know that First Nations Australians have told stories, and use stories to pass on wisdom, create connection and share knowledge for 10s of 1000s of years and hundreds of generations. And we'd like to pay homage to it as part of this podcast. This series is a GRDC investment that takes you behind the scenes as we sit down with some of the people shaping our grain industry, uncovering their journeys, learning more about their passions and the projects that are part of their everyday. we're uncovering Australia's grain growing regions, chatting with researchers, advisors, growers, advocates, and just about everyone in between. So thank you for joining us as part of the GRDC in conversation podcast. And let's jump into it. Welcome back to another episode of GRDC in conversation. One thing I absolutely love about this whole series is unearthing some of these incredible stories of just different people who have contributed and continued to contribute to the Australian grains industry. Every conversation brings something different within it. And this conversation with Roy Hamilton filled me with energy and optimism. And I walked away from it Really just feeling pretty hopeful and optimistic about not just the role of agriculture but the world we live in. Roy has been farming in and around Rand since his childhood in the 1960s and 70s. In his conversation we touch on how over the generations different farming practices have come to be and how they've then evolved, continually getting better, as the access to information and knowledge grows as a bit of a teaser to how this episode ends. And I can't just let you jump right to the end to skip to it. Roy says probably some of the most heartfelt words that I've ever been witness to at the helm of the podcast microphone. It is raw honesty and his ability to share his story that make this one one of the really really special chats. Enjoy. Roy Hamilton operates a 4400 hectare mixed family farming business near Rand in New South Wales Riverina alongside his wife, Leanne has been an early adopter of minimum tillage practices and direct drill and press wheel technology and is currently running controlled traffic farming on 12 metres mate we might have to you might actually have to explain a few of these things to me because part of it are a little bit beyond my paygrade. But you've been actively involved with the GRDC with other advisory committees. And when it came up Roy's someone said have you got Roy Hamilton on your list? Ad I said I don't actually and I said you need to get him on because he's got a really interesting background of the family farming business, but also incredibly passionate about farm safety, which is a topic which I think often we don't necessarily talk about. And at the beginning of this podcast, we were just chatting off air about the importance of the human side. So it's obviously something that you're quite passionate about and keen to bring into the conversation of agriculture.

**Roy Hamilton** 03:26

Look I am I think so I grew up I born in 58. I'm 65 and growing up in the 60s and 70s. So the cultural practices around what your dad did what your granddad did, it wasn't so much about what we actually had learned and what we can do better. And that was fairly entrenched about taking shortcuts, taking risks, fatigue, all those things. And at the end of the day, it's none of this is worth that if we can't get home in good shape, or get home at all.

**Oli Le Lievre** 03:54

So after such an extensive period of time in farming, what is it that gets you out of bed in the morning and keeps you involved?

**Roy Hamilton** 04:00

Growing things. It's not what you'ree deallt. I mean, every year is different. We go from what we were last year maybe decile nine or 10 to maybe a decile three or four this year. It's actually how you play your cards and how you prioritise what you're doing how you're looking after your crops how yr'e looking after you sheep and every day in agriculture is different and I think it's just the passion for growing the best way you can. There's always a challenge to do things better and that's about water use efficiency about growing more with less and, and how you manipulate those little dials all the way along whether it's you know, we've learned over the last 30 years Oli about obviously about stubble retention about some spraying about minimising soil disturbance all these things which really has kept agriculture in the game and probably at the forefront of adapting to climate change.

**Oli Le Lievre** 04:50

I've got a few questions off of that. If you could describe your ideal day in farming, what would it look like?

**Roy Hamilton** 04:57

My ideal day in farming be getting up About five, go for a walk with the dogs and come back and the phone hasn't rung by 730. And something hasn't gone wrong, I go out to do a bit of machinery and it starts. I operate that machinery without getting bogged. After the last two years, I suppose that's front of mind is just how challenging it was to do a job to do you 10 or 12, or 14 hours like everyone else does, and come back and have a beer and say you've achieved something for the day, something that's tangible. Another great day is actually, we do still have some sheep on this property is getting behind a mob of sheep with a good sheep dog, and just letting it all happen. It's very therapeutic sheep. You gotta like animals to run sheep. People go, there's money in sheep, so I'll run sheep, but that doesn't work. You've got to first like the animals, and then it will work for you.

**Oli Le Lievre** 05:44

And there's a whole debate that we can get into which we will avoid but as a sheep dumb, are they actually intelligent because they have learned from previous experiences that maybe going through that gate Isn't the thing they want to do? So we'll avoid that one.

**Roy Hamilton** 05:58

Yes, I think sometimes you got to put yourself on the other side of the fence and think how they thinking instead of forcing them get on their side and just try and understand what works better for them. And there's some great work done in that there's some of these, you know, really cool swanky yard set up shade, everything like that. It's just made running sheep a lot less challenging maybe what it was, but sheep are something I think if you're running them, you've got to have adaptive time, you've got to have spare time available to react to things with sheep because they're a living animal tey're um. It's not like a crop that on a Friday afternoon, you think that might need attention. You get an agronomist on a Monday spray it on a Tuesday, and it's done. But if you're heading out a Friday night, and there's half a dozen sheep stuck in the dam, you really got no choice. You've got to turn around and react to it

**Oli Le Lievre** 06:42

How is your business benefited from having the mixed enterprise?

**Roy Hamilton** 06:46

We're on a floodplain Oli. So we've got a lot of creek frontage that you can't readily farm. So it's there's some really good synergies in running sheep here. So we 80% of the business is cropping and 20% livestock. So we tend to graze where we can graze the stock on early sown crops, we don't graze crops, then we lock them up in the spring. And then in the summer, they've got all this stable country to run on. So it works. It's really complimentary. And I mean, I think with climate change, it's about diversity of enterprise as much as we can, because you never know when it's going to rain, how much it's going to rain. And these markets in the last six months is a great example of where markets can move very quickly. So I think the more pots you got on the go at once the better.

**Oli Le Lievre** 07:30

At the beginning, you were mentioning, and this is, I think, quite unique. And it's something I really want to tap into because I don't get, I guess, every day the opportunity to sit with someone who has seen such a significant kind of period of farming and able to tap in and unlock this wisdom off you. You mentioned like in the last 20 or 30 years, the acceleration of GPS farming control traffic farming, the stubble retention, etc. Across your life. Can you talk through some of those periods and some of those changes that you've seen in has that change sped up?

**Roy Hamilton** 08:01

Yep. It's a great question. It'll take a little while to unpack. But if you go back in into the 60s, when my dad first came over, he was a Mallee Boy, he was a farmer. And you had this demarcation between grazing and farm he had the white collars, the graziers and the blue collars of farmers and the farmers that get the little paddock down the back to scratch around, they used to be called cockys for a reason they'd scratch around to get a bit of grain in. But there was this sort of demarcation between the two, there's very little mixed farming going on. And when dad came over and took this property on, there was a pushback from people before that you'd kill the native grasses if you went farming and it had ruined the soil. And so there was a change in that. And then you got into the sort of 70s and 80s. And you it was only in I was about 20 or 22 years old I was secretary, the local farmers branch which was called the United Farmers Association. I think it was then and then you had the Graziers Association, they didn't merge until nearly the 80s. And then that became the New South Wales Farmers Association. But there was up until then there was very little people that owned land and ran stock and farmed in the Riverina. it was principally grazing country. That was forced upon us in, let's say, the 80s when sheep declined as an enterprise and people were forced into cropping more ground and then things swapped around a little bit. And it became it was an imperative to crop more of the land because sheep just didn't pay the bills. It was sort of there. And then probably the next phase was the Australian built Queensland tight narrow point Chres wheel, things that are tear into ground that this is terribly hard ground to farm in a traditional way with the spring release mechanism. Often you couldn't cover the seed when you wanted to sow. so they sort of in the 80s and 90s There was a bit of a revolution in how we farm and that was disturbing the soil a lot less having high breakouts and an increase in horsepower of what we could pull with. I mean a big tractor those days was 150 horsepower. Now you four or five times that, but that was we needed the power to pull it to get the seed into the ground, place it where we needed to. And then you go up to the sort of the millennium, I suppose the next sort of the early 2000s. And then it was a very dry period. And we learned a lot about stubble retention, about summer spraying about absolutely minimising any weed growth in the summer to to maximise the ability to grow a crop on less rain in the growing season, we were pretty locked into what we call an April October growing season, we get enough rain in that to grow crops in the 70s and 80s. But with this drying and warming climate, our rainfall patterns change quite a lot. And we can get rain, anytime can be a dominant months, whereas it used to be winter dominant now it's anytime in the summer. So people have adapted to that really well over time and stayed in the game. That's probably three or four of the big changes. So you know, back in the days, I first started farming with these tiny little tractors and offset discs chase you around the paddock when they'd skip out because they wouldn't penetrate, they just take off and you look at the side window, and it was halfway around that tractor because it wasn't even in the ground. There was some fun times. But that's the main one, I think, you know, obviously forever out there terms of trade decline. So we'll either get bigger, and or get better if you stay. In agriculture. It's probably like in any business. If you say you're there and you're stationary, you're actually going backwards, there's no happy state and you got to keep striving to improve. And in our case, we tried to manage paddocks small sites specifically. So doing more testing and zoning paddocks more than when we came out as sort of British immigrants, I suppose were on the lower decks, mind you, but when they came out the they sort of fenced off by a square mile. And that didn't mean all the paddock was the same. And there's high variability within our soils. So we're trying to manage those by their need, and by their constraints to hopefully stay in the game.

**Oli Le Lievre** 11:58

Have you found over your time that that need to continue to strive to improve because of the need to get that economies of scale the declining terms of trade? Have you found it tiring or have you found it invigorating to continue to guess push forward and never settle? .

**Roy Hamilton** 12:14

Yeah Oh, absolutely invigorating. It's a personal challenge. If you can grow, you know, 16 kilogrammes of wheat per millimetre of rain why didn't you grow eighteen? that yield mapping is fantastic On harvesters, I mean the truth detector and you go across the paddock, and you know, the zone is quite similar. And you'll be going along at four and a half tonne, and it drops to 2.8 or 3.3. And you are more interested in why that what's going on there. And then what the average of the paddock was because we spent exactly the same amount across that whole field. But you get this variability. And it's not necessarily bringing that 3.3 Up to four and a half, it's maybe four and a half should have been doing five and the other one should have been doing three and a half. But understanding this is getting on to soils. And I think this is a new frontier or the great frontier is, instead of looking over the fence, a lot of us now looking downwards and saying how can we get more about what we got because it's quite constrained in expansion at the moment, it's difficult with price plus interest rate plus commodity prices our, our gross margins haven't improved. Any way new land values have,

**Oli Le Lievre** 13:17

I'm interested, this is something I often really, really think about. And it's only occurred to me at different times where I'm sitting in in a tractor sewing or doing a bit of spraying or actually in the header harvesting. But I've never actually asked anyone, so I'll be interested, what is the most critical job and one that you wouldn't that you I guess, maintain control over across the southern growing season from planting right through to harvest

**Roy Hamilton** 13:42

the most critical. So once you've planted the crop to harvest,

**Oli Le Lievre** 13:47

I'd say across that whole spectrum from planting right through to harvest, what is the most important and critical practice?

**Roy Hamilton** 13:53

I reckon ground truthing, just actually being in the field and seeing what's going on. So there could be it could be nutrition, or it could be herbicide, but actually being in the field. And for all the remote data we can have if you can get in the paddock and just feel what's going on just ground truthing I think is more important and timing is so there's four or five operations probably between the two. There's early post emergent spraying there's early nutrition, late nutrition rate spraying, disease monitoring, but it's probably just attention to detail and timing would be the two things I can't think of a single most important one than above it because that's going to be dependent on the season you might have a high disease risks like we had last year, this year was probably trying to manage nutrition or in in a drying season was probably front of mind. So each of those ones is going to be come to the forefront depending on what decile year you may be in. I think in 50 years of farming that two things are probably is attention to detail and timing and that can go right through from when you're planning. Next year's crop, which was started to do now is getting stuff on time and the right and be prepared. So you're in the right window.

**Oli Le Lievre** 15:00

so before we jump in chat about so I'd love to know, the type of farmer that your father was and what you took from him because you did head off to boarding school for a few years, but that time with your father, what did you learn about the way he farmed and what were your big takeaways?

**Roy Hamilton** 15:15

I learned passion. I didn't learn a lot in the practical sense your did correspondence school at home and we did very little farming then but I love the farming side. With him. I used to sit in the tractor with him one of those old shamans with a bench seat that's probably gotten industrial deafness from it, but they were great fun. They used to scream and sit there all day in the tractor with him that was a 306 Chamberlain and 14 disc plough and that was a bit of barley bit of oats, you know, 100 hectare, sorry, 100 hectares, yeah, and maybe 200 hectares. And that was about it in those days, because there was constraints. So still leasing country, and there was constraints on yeah about turning over this native grass. He would like to farm it more because that's what he did in the Mallee. He, he was passionate about his cropping. I went away to boarding school for five years, Unfortunately, he passed away the year I came home, and we had about 12 months together. And that was a terrible time that was 7374. So those two years we didn't sell a grain off the place. We had two failed harvests in a row. And as far as the sheep went, we shore in June 73. And we didn't shear until December 74 Because of the flooding. And it actually reminded me last year, but it's a similar sort of story. But it went on for two years and I think honestly probably broke his heart that was so we had 12 yeah, 12 months. But when we tried to get back into it, the country was so sour the bull rushes pin rushes were up about a about a metre high and nearly overall the farm it was just just a mess. And unfortunately, he passed away then, but he there was a few things he I learned from him. He said, Never, ever ask anyone to do anything, you're not going to do yourself, or were prepared to do yourself. And he did say to me, and I mentioned it to Milly the other day. And he said to me because he only Jackerood, we'd never had any tertiary training. But he said, Look, there's more than one way to do something. He said mine might be the right way. So I want you to go away and learn that was in those days there was just jackerooing, there was nothing really around apart from that. So there were a couple of things I learned and it stuck with me. Hopefully through my working life.

**Oli Le Lievre** 17:19

Did you get the chance to go away? It was the hand forced on you with his passing?

**Roy Hamilton** 17:23

Yeah, no, I would I didn't go away. Unfortunately, I would would have been good for that. But the only reason we are here now still on this farm, if I might touch on my mum who's still alive, she's 92. She's legally blind. She'll bumps around in a unit in Corowa, she uses a cane and gets around. And she does about eight hours of quizzes a week I think on the radio, and she just keeps doing everything she possibly can for as long as she can. That's her words, she will keep herself going. doing that. And that she was when dad died. She was 45 she had three children a large debt, and things weren't going very well as I say we'd had two years of losses and no crop. And 75 wasn't great. So I remember going into the bank with her I was 18, Mum was 45. And in those days, the local bank manager had a tweed coat and glasses usually used to drink with the solicitor, the doctor. And he had all the nice words and eventually sort of looked over his glasses. And he said my mom's name is Helen, he said, Of course Helen we'll look after you until the sale. And Mum just stiffened up in her seat. She doesn't say much. And she got home and with steely determination. She hung on but it wasn't common. And probably that a 45 year old woman by herself would keep the farm going. This is talking on this is nearly 50 years ago now. So the only reason we are here today is because of her determination

**Oli Le Lievre** 18:45

What an extraordinary woman. So So you mentioned that your dad gave you the advice. There's more than one way to do a job. And mine might not be the right way to go and get that experience. That is just such good advice. And so forward thinking and progressive. So beyond that, as you came back into the business, your mom really took the reins of it. What did you learn through her?

**Roy Hamilton** 19:06

I learned probably determination hard work, respect and cooperation. We work really well together Mum and I were here for yeah a few years, just ourselves and it was actually just comes to mind. I all of 19 I decided I need to buy a harvester oli to go and behind this orange tractor of mine, the 306. So I said Ma'am, I think we need to buy our own harvester instead of getting a contractor. So went down to the machinery dealer at Corowa, and there was a 585 Massey, header second or probably third hand. It was about $5,000 worth it was a big investment at the time and anyway, with Mums total support we bought this harvester and got it home and unbeknown to me mum had rang the dealer up. Tom, Tommy O'Brien was the dealer lovely bloke. And she said, Tom, I'm worried I don't think Roy knows what he's doing. And Tom said to his credit, he said, Look, if it Helen, if it doesn't work out, I'll take the harvester back afterwards and you can have your money back. So we had some really good people around us that had our back at the time. So yeah, that harvester did stay here in the end, and it was a success and eight or 10 harvests since have been successful, but I still remember the first one the best

**Oli Le Lievre** 20:22

Old Tommy O'Brien and he never needed to take it back. what, what a bloke as well. How did the business grow and evolve as you moved away from the livestock into more of the cropping and farming side?

**Roy Hamilton** 20:34

Yeah, so we always I always took an opportunity to if we possibly could to expand the business, we bought land in 1980 and 93, you know, 407 and 10. We sold a little bit in seven to buy 10. But we so we grew in scale over that time. During that time, I did some contracting bid some share farming. I used to say to the share farming mate of mine, I was there for 20 years, we wrote a document up the first year, and it never came out of the drawer for 20 years. That's the sort of bloke he was he just just a fantastic guy. He's only consideration was I had to cold stubbies at nine o'clock at night when I knocked off for for the drive home. Now you're not allowed Sorry you're not allowed to do that these days. But that was his principle consideration. And he was just a beautiful person to work for. And we never needed to review that document for the whole time it was there. And so that share farming used to say to him, I said, you've educated my kids, all the kids went to boarding school. And it was it's probably through the share farming that we gave us enough scale to do that. As far as learning goes that early days, there wasn't the agronomists around that there are now but certainly wasn't a private ones. There was a couple of DA's around but I used to go to the front bar of the daystar hotel and after playing footy or trying to play footy and go down the end where the guys that they'd be the guys have done really well. They typically have fairlane out the front, and they'd buy a new holland header every three years. And so I'd sit down there and just pepper them with questions about how you should do this. Why do you plough then and what should you do here and I found that was fantastic agriculture, then 50 years ago now it's very collegial industry. And people are very willing to share ideas for the betterment of the whole industry, they don't, most people don't hang on to stuff they don't don't find an advantage. We're not competing with each other. We're working together. And I am very grateful for everyone that shared information and helped me along the journey, particularly in early days when I don't know a lot now, but I knew a lot less then

**Oli Le Lievre** 22:30

the original grower group by the sounds of it.

**Roy Hamilton** 22:33

Oh, absolutely. Yeah. And a couple of beers thrown in. It was great fun, but yeah I remember one bloke, he told me, He said, Look, he said with this harrowing, you know, he said every time you harrow that paddock, you'll get another bag to the acre this is before we went matric and I couldn't quite get my head around why we're actually doing this. They used to call this conservation tillage. I think if you're bored with your wife or something and you want to get out of the house, you go and cultivate a paddock again just to get away. Get away from the kids or something like that.

**Oli Le Lievre** 23:00

And was it these blokes from the bar that really started to introduce you to the these new and progressive ways of farming. And and I guess on top of that, like where were they getting their information from? Or were they just the, I guess, the Forward Thinking innovators that were willing to try different things?

**Roy Hamilton** 23:15

Yeah, I think they were early adopters, they probably had enough momentum. And they they probably didn't have a private consultant. A lot of the private consultants sort of grew when the DA on talking for New South Wales. And now when they sort of phased out the district agronomist, a lot of those guys and girls went private and they'd been a godsend, they've been fantastic. It's we really miss that mentoring that the Department of Ag used to provide by having people learn in different ways. And some people prefer to learn just sitting around a couple of hay bales in the back of a shed with half a dozen blokes and a facilitator. So we do miss them. these blokes, yeah they probably spoke to their retailer, they probably went for a drive every year. Some of these you in businesses, it's not so much working in your business, but working on it. And a lot of these guys might just take a trip up north and have a look around or go over South Australia and open your eyes. And because it's very easy to get bogged in the now and what you're working on. But to get away and look back at it.

**Oli Le Lievre** 24:08

Where do you reckon you fall into that adoption curve? And even with some of the newer technologies that are coming in now? Are you an early adopter? Or do you wait a little bit? Normally?

**Roy Hamilton** 24:17

We're fairly early adopters, if there's a business case we'll have Yeah, we'll have a go at it for sure. Because if you don't, I mean, the case in points optical spraying, which we'd like to get into, we've just bought a new boom, we chose to just stay out of because it's the same price to retrofit as it is to fit on there. And there's so much movement in that space at the moment, another year or two is not going to make a big difference to it. But it will be a terrific innovation in this area. As there's more algorithms written and we understand green on brown and green on green technology. It's going to be fantastic and society will want to know why we're not using this sort of technology if it's available in agriculture because this gets on to this whole sort of Right to Farm and social licence around how we're doing it, because we're not only, I don't think we own the land, we own the right to manage the land in our lifetime. And we're also custodians of the land for the rest of the nation. And we want to make sure we're doing the right thing, by everyone, and I don't know, anyone in ag who doesn't want to do the right thing. You know, our mission, one of our mission statements is to leave the land better than we found it on in a family document. And we're very keen on pursuing anything that will minimise our environmental footprint and enhance our soil health. Because our soils our. I mean, it's their greatest asset.

**Oli Le Lievre** 25:40

I'm gonna say, Roy, and I don't want to pump your tires up here. But you're incredibly progressive in the way you think about these different things that what has shaped that?

**Roy Hamilton** 25:48

I think that desire to be, again, if Why not strive for constant improvement, I remember guys, I went to a funeral that lovely fella and he, One of the things in the eulogy was every time he got in the ute and drove down the paddock, he would analyse what he was going to do, and why couldn't he do it better? And I sort of struck a chord with me, that's very much how I feel. Okay, I'm satisfied with that. But there's the bar, if the bar is there, why can't it be higher? Why can't we achieve more, because again, if you strive to be up a little bit higher, you're further from the bottom, basically, and less vulnerable to four year drought or something else, that'll go wrong interest rates, I mean, I lived through interest rates that we bought my son land at around about 10%. And 18 months later, it was at 19 and a half, and it was still going up. And those they're very challenging times. But the more I guess I'm talking about trying to build resilience in the business by being the best that you could possibly be at any given time. And I think, as far as influencing business resilience, it's about managing those last few years, as much as making good money in the good years. I think everyone can do that. But more often than not, we're going to be challenged to break or even have a little loss. But understanding we we're at at any given time is really important. And just striving to mind is driven by trying to do the best job I can every day.

**Oli Le Lievre** 27:13

From a practical sense, what are some of those systems that you're using now to help give you a greater insight into where your business is sitting?

**Roy Hamilton** 27:23

I do like data I'm we've been yield mapping for 20 odd years. We've got really good rainfall records, we've got really good paddock records. So I think they're reasonably good of gross margins over time, it's really dangerous to look at something for one or two years and say that's really working well. I'd really like to look at over eight or 10 years, whether it's a cropping sequence or a particular commodity, because you've got to run it through the the decile sevens and the decile twos to see if it's, I suppose, given it a resilience test itself to see how it really fits in the business. But understanding your cost of production, understanding your profit drivers. And yeah, that's probably the main one is just understanding, contact the noise out of the short term stuff, and looking at long term is a trend in the right direction.

**Oli Le Lievre** 28:06

It's really interesting, especially at the moment, as people face these depressions in terms of income through seasonal conditions, prices etc. If you do look at it over a longer period of time, it does give you a far clearer insight

**Roy Hamilton** 28:18

If you're good at sheep and you've been running sheep for a while you get through this period, no problem. This is a little blink. If you look at a rolling average of lambs over the last five years been really good. It's been over that the 15 trend 15 year trend line by a fair way. This is hard. And it's really easy to be quite reactive and say I've got to get out of sheep because there's no money in them. There probably isn't just at the moment. But markets have a great way of evening things out. And as that price drops, the market opens up and hopefully it's more consumption and it meets in the middle somewhere. And you cannot the biggest I think downfall in agriculture is chasing waves. It's really easy to chase. Why isn't going well, that pulse is worth $1,000 a tonne. So I'll put half mirror into that pulse. But is your country suitable to is for it? Is it the right season to do that and chasing rainbows chasing waves is a way of going backwards pretty quick. But I think if you're good at it, you stick at it. And hopefully either you get through the other side whether you have these short terms and I mean, we were drunk two years ago with commodity prices when you think about everything was the top percentile. everything was it was crazy times and it's no one rings the bell to say that's the top of the market until after it's gone.

**Oli Le Lievre** 29:29

When they called records for a reason too aren't They, they don't stick around at record levels forever

**Roy Hamilton** 29:34

Absolutely. The other great one I think you'll learn in farming is you know, average is just a midpoint of two extremes.

**Oli Le Lievre** 29:41

 I like that.

**Roy Hamilton** 29:42

And often, often you're managing one side of that

**Oli Le Lievre** 29:45

The Riverine Plains. You're a founding committee member of that farming group that has just continued to evolve. And and I think over the last couple of years, they've really also stepped ahead again, in terms of the way they've brought two people together the information they're sharing the way that they're running that Not just for the members, but actually more broadly across the sector and and bringing in the likes of Uncle Toby's and others. It's kind of these businesses that really do have quite an influence and a vested interest in what's happening in the grain growing regions. But it's often maybe we don't actually bring them to the table to get their input in it. So when did you get involved with riverine planes? And what does that look like?

**Roy Hamilton** 30:22

I got involved in riv planes since inception. We had a couple of, I suppose expressions of interest meetings, I think Malcolm Ferguson might have rang me up and said, Would you come down because we're trying to work out where our capture area will be and whether it's got legs and I admire them on it very small part in it, but they did it. Here where we do huge amount of groundwork at the start trying to work out how you incorporate something, how you register a name how you do all this, you know, nuts and bolts stuff to where it's grown now. It's just so much credit to the people that have kept it going. And it's grown organically. And it's grown independently. It's now it's not a you know, a just an organisation that writes submissions for funding. It's standing on its own feet, and it's a destination organisation to run extension and things in the ground. And it's really unique in the sense how it's survived and thrived because go from Dookie. It's sort of I don't know, what's that four or 500, no, sorry, six or 700 mil rainfall up to Lockhart at 400. And it's got members all the way through. And it's just it's doing some really, really high level stuff. And you know, their motto, which is farmers inspiring farmers, I mentioned about different people learning in different ways, it's really holds true because we've got some great research organisations at top end, the down the bottom of that pyramid where our levy payers are and people are a lot of them learn laterally, they learn across from another person, they look across the fence, they go to a riv planes day where I was at one this morning, actually the pulse walk this morning at day style it was great 25 people great conversation. And the facilitators can just get they open up the conversation. There's so much learning from farmer to farmer and that's how river riverine planes formed. And that's how it's probably sustained, because it gives a platform for people to not only be introduced to really high level research, but also gives them a forum to, to ask and be asked questions.

**Oli Le Lievre** 32:18

And we've definitely found that like that, I'll say the farmer to farmer learning and more broadly, the agronomist and researchers, and as part of this, the evolution that is GRDC In conversations is going we've got such great science and research that we know and can get out through the channels. But then actually, the benefit of having people like yourself and the other guests we've had, whether they're advisors, researchers, academics, across the gamut of the grain growing industry, people are not just getting to know the human behind it, they're actually learning and there might be a couple of things that you say, or one thing or half a dozen, that can that actually relate to and go, Oh, you know what? I loved how Roy said that. And I'm going to come bring that back into my business. And I think I'm going to try and do this a little bit more actively.

**Roy Hamilton** 33:02

Yep. Yeah, for sure. I think that was one of my criticism. GRDC some time ago, it was a really good organisation that top a lot of this white coat researchers coming in fantastic. But there was a divide between that and the levy pays, it was too big a gap. And, to their credit, now regionalised their offices, and they've got people on the ground, they've got grower relations managers, you know, scattered throughout the regions. And that can give growers pretty quick feedback on queries, constraints opportunities, which is fantastic. And so it's, you know, it's a big ship. And it's not always going exactly in the right direction. But it generally is heading that way. Which is really good. Because without the people without the levy payers, it's nothing there.

**Oli Le Lievre** 33:40

Yeah, and I think that's a key piece, isn't it of having that involvement, having those touch points, but also for the growers who are listening to this to actually get involved in those conversations. And if there's a piece of or an area that you're looking to find out more or that you think actually deserves a little bit more attention, jump on in and reach out, because that feedback is always going to be far more beneficial when it's coming from the ground up.

**Roy Hamilton** 34:01

Oh look bbsolutely it is I mean, this organisation GRDC feeds information out, but it's also looking for information to be fed in about what is needed in sub regional areas, what's going on. And that's where farmers on the ground Riv Planes, Farm Link, all these organisations have have a big role in that because we're actually pretty unique in the world. There's not many connected research organisations like GRDC. And now in Canada, you might have the canola Research Association, you'll have a wheat Research Association, but they're working in silos and not working together in a systems basis. And I think what we all want to know is what is the best system in our area? Or what's our best system choice in our area to stay in the game and that's the sort of stuff that's coming out in the ground at the moment, which is really good.

**Oli Le Lievre** 34:48

Yeah. Now, I've really enjoyed talking about your progressive approach to how you actually farm how that's evolved. The other area I am really keen to chat to you about Roy is around the farm safety and mental health aspect of how to actually look after our people better, because I know it's somewhere that it's an area which you've got quite actively involved in and keen at talking, I guess more to because it is so important. How has farm safety and mental health come in and had an impact on your life?

**Roy Hamilton** 35:18

Yes. So farm side, I suppose firstly, as a dad and a granddad and an employer, that is making sure everyone gets home, whether it's kids come out here for a holiday, you know, sleepover whatever, whether it's a new employee, whether it's someone been around, whether it's me, I mean, you know, I still climb silos, but I don't want anyone else to climb silos because they shouldn't be doing that. I still do it. That's, I fear for other people's safety, I suppose. But you also got to look after your own and how you manage that. I think safety around farming is a lot better than what it was, I think we've learned a lot from mining and from corporate farming, about how we should go about things. And a lot of times it's actually slowing down. And being in the moment. And I've got examples from myself, and which has just done some terrible things. When I was younger, you know, with as far as being barbed and cutting corners, because your minds aren't actually Why did you go in there and this you shouldn't have driven through there in the first place. So one you're angry, two you're frustrated, because there's a truck waiting to load down the other end of the paddock. And if you get the bin out, you'll get down and get loaded. So you have all these things going in your mind, but actually not what you actually posed to do the time and there was one time there aww gee, Leanne my wife had little baby in arm, she was pulling me out of a bog and the drag chain snapped and went through the back window and showered them in glass. No one got hurt. But yeah I suppose that was one of my early things about what should we have done differently here. Snatch straps weren't invented in those days. But there's a lot of good information around now how we should do things, whether it's extracting bog vehicles, how we should take the time to go and hire that cherry picker to go and do a job to clean out a gutter instead of hanging off a front end loader. These things we just in agriculture, if a corporate was doing it, they'd probably do it the right way. A mining company would definitely do it the right way. In agriculture, we're probably still catching up in those areas. I think fatigue management, the trucking industry, you know, you keep a log and you go, Well, this is only how many hours I can do. We haven't got to that yet. And agriculture, I think we probably should. And some farmers who say Well, that's ridiculous, because there's a rain coming. And you've got to get it in. And we've all done all night shifts and gone 36 hours and done all this and that's fine. But is it fine, it's fine until something goes wrong. And I think yeah, we can get get better in some of those areas. It's just just slowing down and being aware of where we're at and what we're doing at the time. Regarding mental health, again, technology wise, we've never been better connected. We're having this conversation wouldn't have been possible 10 or 15 years ago. And it's like we're in the same room. That's great. However, I think in agriculture never been more isolated from each other, that most of the farms have grown in scale. Most of the towns here that are under 1000. People have an ageing demographic with less services. So people travel further and less connected locally. The things we still got going well in there is regional football, netball, those sorts of things that happen on a Saturday, which are really important, because a phone call or a text is not the same as me looking at you sitting over having a beer or having a coffee and actually having eye contact with someone. It's just so important. And we've had less opportunity to do that when I said earlier on that the farmers farms was smaller, there was a lot more cooperation that we'd Mark lambs for our neighbour and they'd come over and Mark lambs for us. So there's this cooperative sort of venture so you had more more interaction. And again, with probably in those days, it was more livestock in the area. So there was probably more labour required. And now as I say a 500 horsepower tractor, you can get a lot done with one or two people people are putting in amazing, they're putting in you know, four or 5000 6000 hectares with a couple of people, maybe three people that can get it all done where that might have taken 10 people a few years ago to do the same job. And we're social animals we're supposed to be walking we're supposed to talk and we would probably have limited opportunity to do both less than what we used to do. I think yeah, isolation can sort of enhance when you're feeling down it makes it worse because you can't get it off I think women are you know, you should have a holder light up to women I just do it so much better than men. I think men are getting better at it but women can get it all out and a cup of tea and it's all over and they move on and men just bottle stuff up to a degree and we just got to work at it. I think it's just a crying shame and it's it's not right that if I walked out this room here and tripped over and broke my leg there'd be an ambulance here in an hour and I'd be right getting better next time in hospital and Albury but if I rang Oli up and said look Oli I'm really sad and I struggle to get out of bed and I don't know what to do and you rang someone for me in, it could be six months before you could get anyone to talk to. That's not right. In Australia, in a first world country, we've got to do better than that we these services are just chronically short. And we know what the statistics are like, in isolated areas, whether it's professionals working in isolated areas, it's not just agriculture, but people working in isolated regions, the statistics are awful. And you know, as a nation, we need to take that on.

**Oli Le Lievre** 40:27

It's certainly sobering. And I think, a big part and if anyone hasn't checked it out in earlier in 2023, just depending on when people listen to this, but earlier in 2023, Norco and the National Farmers Federation did actually do a report, which was looking at the state of mental wellbeing for Australian farmers. And, and as you say, those statistics that came out of that are incredibly sobering. I think, where the positives come out of it is going okay, well, that's the baseline. Let's make that as bad as it gets. And how do we actually improve from that, and I think, Roy, having conversations like this, and you actually sharing your insights, is really just such a, it's such a huge part in the beginning of this conversation. And I think this progression, because ultimately, it's going to make our businesses, our families, our communities and the broader industry so much better, when we do actually think far more proactively about mental health and safety. And all of those, I guess, the human aspects that actually come back into the farming side,

**Roy Hamilton** 41:21

I agree entirely. I think if you're down, and we all get down, I mean, we don't, life's not linear, it's not a straight line, we're up and down, it's when those downs get harder to get out, or when they last longer is really difficult. If you don't have or don't feel you can reach out to someone and have a chat. And I've supported people and I've been down at various times have sought out a psychologist who has been a great help. It didn't change everything. But it certainly helped to talk things out and try and maybe help clarify why you are where you are at the time. And it was great helping to recommend it to anyone and it's not a it's not a sign of weakness, it's a sign of actually being proactive and doing something about it. But unfortunately, for many of us, we actually don't realise we're down and other people might see it, but sometimes you can't see yourself.

**Oli Le Lievre** 42:05

And I think I can jump in firsthand there as well. And just say that the benefit of actually getting out of your own head. And this might be in a in a mental well being thing. But actually from your business point of view as well. That benefit that you can get from getting out of your own head and especially verbalising these things is hugely powerful. Roy We've covered quite a bit of country from your little pocket there down in Rand. But I've got five questions we're asking everyone. So they they're designed to be off the cuff kind of first things you think about. And the first one is, what's something that you've got on your bucket list.

**Roy Hamilton** 42:39

That's a good one. I'd like to probably do a trip around Australia with my wife and a couple of years do the big globe around. I think it's yeah, I'd like to do that.

**Oli Le Lievre** 42:48

The big lap. What's your favourite grain based dish or grain product?

**Roy Hamilton** 42:53

favourite, oh WheetBix

**Oli Le Lievre** 42:54

Ooh nice one. who would be three people past or present? If you can invite anyone around for we'll call it a bowl of wheetbix. Who would you invite?

**Roy Hamilton** 43:04

Steve Warr, Barack Obama and sid Kidman

**Oli Le Lievre** 43:09

interesting. It'd be a very interesting chat bit of past bit of present.

**Roy Hamilton** 43:13

Yep. Loved how sid Kidman thought about things and how he viewed things differently to other people.

**Oli Le Lievre** 43:19

What was your first ever paid job?

**Roy Hamilton** 43:21

First ever paid job was going up to our neighbours. So I was about 16 Holding rams, it was a stud. So I stood there and held rains all day. There was an EH Holden Ute. That had a rusted fuel tank on it. So we we tied a 20 litre drum to the back window and filled it up with petrol so it would run to the motor. And I drove up there with a EH ute for my first job. And the second one, funnily enough was yeah, when dad employed me, I've left school for that 12 months and things were going that bad after about a month, he said you can stay here, but I can't keep paying you. So I stayed anyway.

**Oli Le Lievre** 43:59

And just as well, you did.

**Roy Hamilton** 44:00

I wasn't worth the $32 a week. I wasn't worth the I think the award was $32. And it wasn't worth that. But I was getting fuel and a bit of the money. So that was a real wasn't good for the ego.

**Oli Le Lievre** 44:13

What's a question that you've got for future guests or something that you're curious about at the moment?

**Roy Hamilton** 44:17

What am I curious about it's nothing to do with agriculture, it's probably a global question about how we can actually how we can be better. I mean, what's happened at Ukraine, what's happening in the Middle East? Why are we where we are. I was in New York on September 11. And we'd gone up a trade centre the day before, and the only reason I'm here today was there was a lot of cloud around it and a lot of other people and they didn't fly that day. They flew the next day. And it made me think a lot about the world then and how it would change meant but that's 22 years ago, unfortunately, it's I don't know really, if it has changed for the better. That was a very defining moment in my life at the time, and you thought I thought society Has got to change, we got to be kinder, we got to got to look after each other. But that's that's the thing. I'm curious about how we can get better. And I'm not talking about Australia or America or just talking about the global community, we've got so much energy, if we could put it into something, you know, collectively good, it'd be a lot better place to live, if people could just be kinder to each other.

**Oli Le Lievre** 45:19

It's the real human side of it all, isn't it.

**Roy Hamilton** 45:21

Yeah, to be more, you know, considerative of diversity. It's not not my way or the highway.

**Oli Le Lievre** 45:27

Roy, thank you so much. I think that's such a perfect way to kind of wrap the conversation. But I think, overall, thank you for spending the afternoon, the time with us because of the way you think and the way you've approached your business and the benefit that you're making, not just to your farming business, but the community. And I think this way of thinking is so important for us as a sector to actually verbalise and get out in the open as well. So thank you.

**Roy Hamilton** 45:50

Yeah, that's a pleasure, absolute pleasure. I was thinking about one thing, you said one of the, I forget what you said, one of the three things you're hopeful. And this is difficult for me because my family is not connected at the moment, it's been sad the last couple of years. And I suppose if I wished for something, it was family reconnection for reconciliation and connection. that's certainly is on the mind.

**Oli Le Lievre** 46:19

I hope you do get that. Roy. Thank you for sharing that.

**Roy Hamilton** 46:22

Yeah, Because at the end, there's only three things in life. It's important to me from a family mates and my health and there's nothing else really everything else falls into place after that.

**Oli Le Lievre** 46:31

Absolutely. No, thank you so much for joining us Roy

**Roy Hamilton** 46:34

No worries Oli, good on you.

**Oli Le Lievre** 46:35

Thanks for joining us for the GRDC in conversation podcast. This series is a GRDC investment that's sharing the stories of the people who are living and breathing the Aussie grain sector. Make sure you check out some of our other conversations and hit follow on your favourite podcast app to never miss an episode.