# Science to Practice Forum 2023

Day 2 Session 3 transcript

(Duration 61 mins 44 secs)

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## Introduction

This is the transcript of one of the Future Drought Fund’s Science to Practice Forum sessions, presented by the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry. This transcript is for Day 2 of the Forum, session 3, Farming through drought: Lived experiences and lessons learned.

Learn more about the [Science to Practice Forum](https://www.agriculture.gov.au/agriculture-land/farm-food-drought/drought/future-drought-fund/research-adoption-program/science-to-practice-forum).

## Transcript

[Recording begins]

Pip Courtney [00:00:03]:

Welcome back to day 2 of the Science to Practice Forum. The afternoon program promises to be as dynamic as this morning’s. There’s already been some great interaction between you at home, on the farm, or in the office with our forum presenters. So keep those questions coming via Slido. It’s new to me, but it worked a treat yesterday. Shortly in today’s panel chat, you’ll meet a group of NextGen farmers using social media to talk up and explain Australian agriculture to a wider audience. Speaking of tech, later today, you’ll hear from a digital innovation consultant, empowering rural and regional producers to better understand what AgTech tools are available and where they’re best applied. So stay tuned. Now, though, from the digital world, back to the terrestrial one and to New South Wales. Jaymie Dawes is the Program Manager of Community and Partnerships for the East Gippsland Catchment Management Authority. The East Gippsland CMA was one of the Future Drought Fund’s delivery partners in the NRM Drought Resilient Soils and Landscapes program. Jaymie, tell us about the development, implementation and outcomes from the Sowing the Gap project.

Jaymie Dawes [00:01:18]:

My name’s Jaymie Dawes and I work for the East Gippsland Catchment Management Authority in Victoria. We ran a project called Sowing the Gap, which was funded through the Future Drought Fund a couple of years back now. So it started in 2021, right on the tail of the devastating bush fires and also the Covid pandemic. So there was a couple of challenges, additional challenges for this project, but today I was just going to cover what the overall thoughts were for the project, what we were able to deliver, and just a couple of key findings that we were able to capture. I’ve just changed across to what the outcomes for the project were aiming to achieve. So the main one that we were looking at doing was empowering farmers in the agricultural community in Gippsland, but particularly East Gippsland, to increase their capacity and prepare and respond to droughts.

So not necessarily during a drought, but getting people thinking about the droughts before the next dry comes, not waiting until, you know, we’re actually in those dry periods again. So to design a project that will deliver meaningful impacts around these outcomes, we designed a project that was very much farmer led, so the members of the agricultural community that are participating in the project had a really strong hand in designing what we were actually looking at trialling. So we had groups of farmers that chose their own seed compositions, then we had 10 different trial sites right across East Gippsland so that people could look into their neighbours’ paddocks and see what they were trialling, what the different pasture crops looked like across the region as well. So we had lots and lots of field days so people could go out and have a look at what’s happening on the ground and see what it looks like in Omeo versus Cann River, etcetera.

And we also really tried to have an emphasis on peer-to-peer learning so that the farmers who were around during the last drought could pass information on and talk to their neighbours from different towns or, you know, different regions getting together and talking about what strategies they implemented, what they wish they did differently, what they did that worked for them, and just have that open dialogue, by letting people get together for these field days, seeing the on-ground trials, and also just chatting around those things that impacted them. So I’ve got a couple of points up here as well, which I’ve already kind of covered. So we had the 10 trial sites right across East Gippsland because there’s a fair bit of variability in soil types and climates and those kinds of things. So it’s definitely not a one size fits all type of project.

So we were looking at different pasture and forage crop seed mixes, and put down at different applications. Some of them had lime, some of them didn’t, and a whole bunch of different trials designed by the farmers to see what would prevent having bare patches of earth throughout all of the seasons. So we had field days for each of those trial sites as well, once they’d been sown and the pasture or crop had grown, and farmers from different regions got to go out, have a look in person with their own eyes and make their own decisions on what’s growing well where, and decide whether or not to start implementing those things at their own farms that they manage. We also focused on having discussions around the past drought and capturing some of the farmers’ thoughts and case studies so that we can provide that information next time there’s a drought and provide that information in the form of case studies to farmers who may be in a similar situation.

So we’ve produced a whole bunch of videos, provided or pulled together a booklet summarising some of the strategies that farmers from East Gippsland implemented in the last drought. And we’ve also got them available on the website as well for anyone to refer to next time it’s getting dry. So I’ve popped up a few photos here of some of the field days. You can see some of the farmers out there having a bit of a chat talking about what they can see. We had agronomists there as well to help people understand what the soil tests were showing, what the feed tests were showing. And we had a real mix of seed mixes across the trial sites. I have also popped in a couple more photos.

There was lots and lots of field days, lots and lots of opportunities to interact and talk firsthand to farmers, you know, farmers that they might not have met before or, you know, they’d heard of but hadn’t spoken to in person. And also an opportunity to actually visit each other’s farms and talk about what the drought looked like for them last time around and what they implemented. And on the bottom left there, I thought I’d pop in that photo as well, because unfortunately we can’t control the weather. We had a really, really wet year when we were trying to run this drought project, ironically. So navigating wet weather events and not being able to access some of the trial sites was a real concern for us at some points, but luckily we were able to reschedule and make sure that things were running to target.

I’ve also popped up here, these were our measures that we had to meet to demonstrate that the project was successful. So the way that we measured this was, we tried not to overwhelm our participants with paperwork, but what we did do for each field day, is we asked the participants to fill out a survey. And that survey was about 12 questions or so, and it was a self-assessment for the person to say whether or not they were a beef or sheep farmer. They also assessed whether or not they thought themselves that they’d had an increase in their awareness or knowledge as part of attending the field days. And they also indicated as part of those questions whether or not they thought that they had an increase in confidence and also whether or not they intended to adopt a practice change on their own farm that they manage. The results up there on the screen show what the data analysis of the survey results showed, which was that we had 139 people tick that they were a beef and or sheep farmer, and we also had around 74% report that they intended to adopt a practice change now that they’ve had access to that information and seen it from their own eyes in their own backyard, essentially. So that was some fantastic results for the overall project.

I’ve also jotted down a few things that I think made this project successful. Having flexibility so that we could navigate our events around Covid lockdowns so that people could attend. We also really had an emphasis on what the farmers wanted, so they had a very strong preference for practical in-person trials. So we designed the project around that rather than paper-based desktop analysis type things, and also with the case studies, we had different ways of sharing that information. So some people preferred the hard copy printout. So we’ve created some booklets that summarise what each farmer’s response was to the drought and how they implemented their plans to make it through that dry period. Other people preferred the YouTube videos that we created, a series of videos that you can listen directly from the farmer’s mouth, what they were thinking, what they implemented, what they would do if they had their time again, those kinds of things.

All of that’s available on our East Gippsland CMA website but having that variability in the way the information’s presented I think was really well responded to by participants. A couple of barriers for this project is definitely direct and indirect influences from Covid. We had some real issues getting contractors out to prepare sites for the trials, just because people were sick, or they wanted to limit their exposure. So it was hard to reschedule and navigate things, but we managed to get it all done. And also, I mentioned the wet weather events as well. We had some of the trial sites were flooding, which was really tricky when we were trying to talk about droughts and get people thinking about dry periods. But luckily, we were able to get an extension on our project so that when the weather dried out, we were able to continue the trials that way. So they were a couple of the things that were barriers for us in this project. I mentioned earlier that we had created the case studies booklet. This is just the title page. It’s talking about different strategies to track tackle dry times, and it’s word for word what the farmers have told us, so people can take their experiences and digest their information and apply whatever they would like to their own farm next time the dry period rolls around.

So I’ve just popped up my name and number up here. If anyone wants to email me to get some more information on the project, I’m more than happy to share those case studies as far as we can. They’re really useful and really practical for people to have a sift through and read what the farmers were doing in the last drought, what they recommend for other farmers and some other things to take into account that people may not have thought of before. Our East Gippsland CMA website link’s up there as well. All of the videos are accessible on that page, but feel free to send me through an email if you’d like any more information. And thank you so much.

Pip Courtney [00:11:37]:

Thank you, Jaymie . And we know that you’re under the weather today, and I really appreciate you being such a trooper and being part of the forum. Thanks to Jaymie. Chris Nixon and Scott Langley are two farmers who took part in Sowing the Gap. Now they share how the project helped them learn to better manage stock in dry times.

[Video voiceover begins]

Chris Nixon [00:11:59]:

I’m Chris Nixon. I farm here in Bete Belong in Orbost and have at farms at Cann River and Wulgulmerang in the high country. We run 500 dairy cows and up to 2000 beef cows. We were lucky in the drought. We had a large amount of homegrown fodder reserves, mainly silage. I learned my lesson in the 2002 drought where I tried to buy my way through, by buying in hay through the drought, and vowed and declared never to do that again. I have several cut-off points through the year. Anzac Day in April is a classic case for me. If we hadn’t had an autumn rain by then, I look at what the long range forecast is and then we decide how many cattle I can run. In 2018, we sold nearly half our cows.

People underestimate what your pasture can look like if you protect your pasture base. We’ve got highly, highly improved pastures on our farm. And so, you know, at 250 bucks a hectare just for grass seed, it gets very expensive if you destroy your grass pasture base, your cow and calf operation that we are, becomes almost irrelevant compared to having to resow all your country if you destroy your pasture base. So we look after our pasture base. We got down to, here in Orbost, I think, was only a 150 odd cows. We had a few more out at Cann River, and Black Mountain was less than half of its normal stocking rate as well. So the good part was we had cash in the bank. We had no stress because we don’t have all these big feed bills coming in and we could just tick over, you know, you reduce your spending to suit.

I mean, our farm’s highly geared so obviously you’ve got banks and everybody else you have to look after. But because we had the cash in the bank from the sales, we actually just coasted through the drought. Even the dairy farm, we sold 25% of our dairy cows and many, everyone says, oh, don’t sell your dairy cows. Out of our 500 dairy cows, we sold 140 or so, just like that. And just slowly build up the numbers over a period of time. So we’re three years after the drought, I’m fully stocked and cattle prices and dairy prices are wonderful and I’m feeling pretty good about life today.

Scott Langley [00:14:57]:

My name’s Scott Langley, I’m a first-generation farmer. The farm we’re on today we bought just prior to the last drought and felt the full force of that drought. I don’t really wanna be in that position moving forward. Our farm consists of 120 hectares of irrigation and the rest is all dryland. Although cattle prices were falling and collapsing, I took the role, I suppose, thinking that at some stage it’s going to break. So week in week out I continued to buy cattle.

I remember thinking that why would I buy a straw when I can buy quality if I’m gonna pay the cartage to bring it all the way down here? And by the end of the drought, I was paying the same money for the straw as what I was for the original, better quality hay at the beginning of the drought. We’ve now got over a thousand tons of maize buried in a pit for the next one. We’ve put in stock containment areas for both cattle and sheep to try to have enough storage on hand to get through at least 12 months.

Also, having trigger points that, uh, I remember the last load of hay that came in and I spoke at length with my father at the time and said this is it, that’s the last roll of the dice. So, as we were selling cattle, the prime cattle that we were able to actually get off underneath the little amount of irrigation that we had, that was coming to an end and that was the last lot of hay that we could actually afford and, with everything else, and I said, well, we’ve rolled the dice and this is where we’re at. And it was fun along the journey. And if it doesn’t rain, then we’re out. And fortunately, it did sort of start to turn.

I think trigger points is probably the best word that you just need to know once we get to a spot, what you’re going to do. You know, we’ve got to June and it hasn’t rained, well, you know, the older breeders go or whatever that might be. But just having those ones and not resting that you get to June and we’ve got, you know, the forecast states that there’s gonna be 10 mil of rain at the end of the week, so you hang on another week and then you hang on another week. Well, you’ve got to that point, that’s the day it hasn’t, so you do it and everything else actually benefits because you’ve got rid of those, and your mind benefits and the rest of the farm actually benefits. So like anything, no fire’s the same, no floods are ever the same. And definitely no droughts are ever, ever the same. So we can only prepare as well as what we can and just having the right support around you at the time, I think that’s probably the best thing.

[Video voiceover ends]

Pip Courtney [00:18:33]:

That was Scott Langley sharing his drought plan developed through the FDF funded Sowing the Gap project. Are you on TikTok? Perhaps you get your daily dose of content from Instagram or maybe YouTube is more your flavour. Next up, we are bringing you our Day 2 panel featuring young farmers who’ve become social media influencers, advocating for Australian agriculture, the importance of regional and mens’ mental health, and the importance of telling your story. Joining us are three social media superstars, Edwina Robertson, Nick Robinson, AKA Nick Robbo as he’s more well known, and Mark Merrettt. Welcome to the panel, all three. Edwina, you are a country girl, born and raised on a property in northern New South Wales. You’re an entrepreneur and a business owner helping promote women in agriculture. And you’re also a social media trainer with over 25,000 followers on Instagram. Tell us about yourself and why you do what you do on social media.

Edwina Robertson [00:19:36]:

Thanks Pip. Look, I do what I do on social media because firstly, it’s a fantastic platform to get a message out. I think there’s a lot of negativity around social media, but there can also be some really positive reasons to use it as well, and I think finding that beautiful balance is important. And when you find that balance, it can be amazing. And look, just to give everyone a heads up, I’m not in ag per se. I’ve been a country wedding photographer for the last decade and I’ve had a lot of projects in rural Australia because that is part of who I am and something I really value. However, probably one of the best things I’ve discovered from doing what I do is getting a message out into bridging that gap between rural Australia and east of the Great Divide. And I think I’ve only been able to do that because of social media. So I see social media as a very powerful and positive tool that’s not only increased my business ability, but to reach people I wouldn’t have been able to reach otherwise.

Pip Courtney [00:20:48]:

Thank you Edwina. Nick, similarly, a huge social media following. While you are a Producer, you are also the founder of Bloke to Bloke, a podcast that aims to break the ice and shine a light on all things mental health. Tell us how social media has helped you spread your message.

Nick Robinson [00:21:05]:

Thanks for that Pip. Yeah, well firstly to Edwina’s point, the balance of social media I find is the most important thing. There’s some days where I absolutely hate social media and everyone needs to log off and get back into reality and get back into touch what’s going on with their life. But then the benefits and the pros that come from it are also really important too. So yeah, that balance of social media is the first thing I wanted to point out there. Well firstly for me, I grew up in Perth, I grew up in the city. My, family before me was country people. Were all country people. And then I ended up out in the country out in Wongan Hills, which is two hours northeast of Perth. I work for CBH, which is I guess, over East you’ve got GrainCorp, same sort of thing, the grain receivable sites.

And then got sick of that and then moved out onto a farm and now I’ve been farming since. And as I started my social media journey and I just wanted to create content, create things, funny things, mucking around, silly stuff. And then I’ve sort of been through my journey of my mental health battles and what I’ve been through and I’ve gone, hang on, I can put my face to a camera, I have the ability to share, why don’t I share things that are actually worthwhile, rather than what everyone else is doing and mucking around on social media, I can actually benefit from this and help other people with this. So, everything I’ve done wouldn’t be possible without social media, I guess, which is where I see the positives in it. And I think the people that I’ve helped, the magnitude of people that I’ve helped, which has always blown my mind of going around, and I went to V8 supercars the other weekend and a couple boys going to me, I’ve done a podcast for ages like, oh, you’re the Bloke to Bloke podcast guy. Thanks so much for what you do with mental health nurses down in Albany. And it’s, yeah, the engagement I get in person, which is quite interesting, is awesome from what I actually get from social media. So as Edwina has said, it’s the balance that I find so important and knowing the boundaries you need set for yourself with social media and yeah, hate it like no tomorrow some days and some people need to log off, that it is very beneficial when it’s used correctly.

Pip Courtney [00:23:20]:

Yeah thanks Nick. Thanks mate. Mark, you were a participant on the ABC’s Haywire, which puts young Australians at the centre of the conversations to shape their communities. You’re also a YouTuber and videos of your day-to-day farming life reach a large audience online, including me, I’m a big fan. Tell us a bit about yourself and why you think sharing your farming stories is so important.

Mark Merrett [00:23:44]:

Wow, I’m honoured that you’re a fan Pip, because I’m a big fan of yours. Yeah, so I’m a sixth-generation farmer from Kaniva in far Western Victoria. And yeah, I started sharing my farming day-to-day life on YouTube basically because I saw some Americans doing it and I was like, man, I wanna see some Australians doing it because we just farm so differently to what they do. And I had a bit of a look and like, there was a few people doing it and there was a few cool videos on YouTube, like a drone flying around with a cool song, but there was nobody that was like, oh man, I hate this hogweed, it’s stuck around the times on the air seeder like this, we gotta crawl under and pull it out. It’s just, it’s an Australian thing, but nobody was doing it.

And I thought, well, why not give it a go? S yeah, I started and, and I was actually spraying one day and heard an ad for Haywire on the radio. So I signed up and yeah, went through. That gave me a huge launching pad because through some, it was an article on abc.com, I got a huge amount of exposure, which led to a massive influx of subscribers on my channel and some TV opportunities, which blows my mind, that little old me from Kaniva with a GoPro can reach a heap of people. It’s really is incredible, I think. So yeah, from there we’ve just been going along, making more videos, collecting more subscribers and, and showing the world what it’s like to farm in in Australia in Kaniva.

And I’ve been very encouraged to see quite a few different farmers take it up around Australia now. I like to think that I might’ve helped them and encouraged them that it’s important to share our stories of agriculture and I just like to remind people that you are never wrong telling your own story. Like people ask me, but don’t you feel scared sharing it on YouTube? And I’m like, well, I don’t because I believe in what I do and I’m just sharing what I do and if it’s wrong, I do actually want to fix it and make it better. So yeah.

Pip Courtney [00:26:11]:

Are you ever surprised about who follows you and what sort of comments you get back?

Mark Merrett [00:26:19]:

Yeah, I, I have been quite surprised by that. There’s been a very diverse group of people following. I thought when I started I’d be like hitting back at activists and animal activists and environmentalists and stuff like that, but that hasn’t really been the case. I thought it would have more of a negative connotation, but it’s been very positive. I’ve found it to be very encouraging to young farmers as well as to older farmers who, for whatever reason, have had to sell their farm or move off the farm. They’ve found their farming fix in what I’m doing. So yeah, it’s very cool.

Pip Courtney [00:27:07]:

Oh, that’s very nice to hear. Edwina, why did you start sharing things on social media? And are you ever surprised with who’s following you?

Edwina Robertson [00:27:18]:

Pip I have found probably the most beneficial way to get engagement is by storytelling. And initially as a wedding photographer, you know, there’s plenty of photographers, every second person’s a photographer these days and by sharing a photo but putting the story and the caption with the image was far more powerful than just the image itself. And so early on I found that this was this powerful tool and going back into, linking into the projects I’ve had to do within the ag industry, for instance, I did a project called One Bucket in 2018, which was personalising and humanising the drought. So, all I was seeing in mainstream media was this data, 99% of New South Wales is in drought. You know, this dam here at Coonabarabran is, sorry I’ve forgotten the name of it. Coonabarabran is, you know got, it’s 15% capacity, all this sort of stuff.

That kind of data doesn’t resonate with people who aren’t living in it. So by actually going and telling stories of the people who were living in these drought stricken areas, which at the time in 2018 was pretty much everywhere, that started to bring home what drought actually meant. And by humanising and taking images of these families and telling their stories how it affects them on a day-to-day basis, how people aren’t sending their kids to school because they need to be feeding stock, all these things, people resonate with that and it creates emotion. So I think for me and my journey with social media, storytelling is everything. Storytelling and yeah, as Mark said, telling your own story is very powerful because I think a lot of people fail to be vulnerable and authentic in their content. And when you can do that and when you can be authentic, it resonates with everyone else. And that in turn, people see the real you and it’s what people actually wanna see. And that’s in itself is a great way to expand a message, or get a message out there.

Pip Courtney [00:29:39]:

Nick, were you surprised that you found that you had a storyteller in you and you were actually very good at telling stories?

Nick Robinson [00:29:48]:

Not so much surprised. I think I’ve always had a bit of a personality where I look at things differently and am able to share things my way and how I do things. But to get the audience that I have, I’ve kind of come to grasp it eventually. But originally, it’s like, what is this? How is this happening? I’m just sharing a bit of me. But as Edwina and Mark both said, and it’s the main topic of conversation, is the sharing of your own story and the power behind that. And I think that, and the vulnerability. And I think Mark said, correct me if I’m wrong, something you’re never wrong, sharing your own story, whatever it might be. That ties in perfectly with me and what I’ve done with social media and mental health and the power of sharing your own story.

And I’ve seen the value and the benefit in doing that for myself and what I can get out of it for me in opening up how I’m feeling. It’s also a platform for me to express what’s going on in my life, but also opens a door up to so many other people to go, hang on, that’s him sharing these parts of his life that we don’t usually see from people on social media. Now I feel more comfortable to share this part of my life, with this person that I trust. And it opens up so many darn doors when you’re open and vulnerable in who you are, for, you don’t realise how many people, so using social media is the easiest way to get that across from me. It’s like, have a one-on-one conversation with someone, but I can video it and send it out to have thousands and thousands of people see it. And yeah, the power of sharing your own story is something I’ll always support people doing, not only to benefit yourself, but the amount of people you can benefit with. It is endless, I think.

Pip Courtney [00:31:31]:

And we’ve got some questions coming in on, on Slido. Perhaps Mark you’d like to answer this one. Have your motivations or messages changed as your profile has grown?

Mark Merrett [00:31:44]:

I’d like to think that it hasn’t. Obviously, as I’ve grown a higher profile, I’ve had some incredible opportunities to work with brands, in an advertising sort of capacity. But those decisions are, are well thought out and aligned with my business. But I like to think of myself as fairly grounded and at the root of it all, I keep myself a farmer first. I’m a farmer and then I do my YouTube stuff. So the job at hand is always priority for me, and I think that helps me to continue to have the right motivation. And sometimes it does take some motivating, as Nick said. Social media is, is not easy. Sometimes you wish the people that comment wouldn’t comment and, and sometimes you just don’t even feel like doing it at all.

Mark Merrett [00:32:43]:

But it is a very powerful tool like Nick and Edwina both said. Agriculture by its nature is very remote and social media is the perfect tool to do that traveling for us. Never has the world been so connected in the fact that from right here now from my living room or from my office I can be connected with all you guys all around Australia. That’s just incredible. And yeah, I guess for us it’s about showing the world what agriculture’s like and in the best light it is and being vulnerable and showing that. Yeah, social media’s not easy and I don’t know, I hope that an answers it.

Pip Courtney [00:33:31]:

You gotta have a thick skin, don’t you, to be on social media. Mark, because you are a farmer, there’s a another question on Slido that’s come through. Can social media influence adoption of new tools and technology?

Mark Merrett [00:33:47]:

Ah, for sure. So yeah, I think going back to the advertising point, it’s one thing for a salesman to say, this product really works, and you should buy it because I make a 10% commission. But for a farmer to test it out and go, wow, this company sent this to me and I’ve tried it out and I really like it, and this is how it’s benefited my business, then it’s a lot more reliable, especially if they have a whole catalogue of reliable videos behind them. But as far as advancing your techniques in farming, yeah, there’s so much that I’ve learned looking at the precision of how they do things in America, in row crop farming and stuff like that. A lot of that I’m wanting to implement onto our farm, but also share onto our YouTube channel to encourage other people that just because we’re on a large scale dry land doesn’t mean that we have to just do it. Oh, she’ll be right. Just keep going. We can be quite precise and, and we are world leaders in moisture efficiency in Australia, moisture efficiency use. So being precise with our inputs and everything is quite important and will continue to be more and more important in the future.

Pip Courtney [00:35:22]:

And Edwina, this one’s for you, what do you find to be your most popular content?

Edwina Robertson [00:35:29]:

Uh, besides my horrendous dating stories? Everything else is when I am my most vulnerable. So for instance, I’m transferring out of wedding photography now and starting a podcast and doing a few other personal brand things. And like, for instance, the other day I did a post about loneliness and what it’s like to feel lonely, and friendships, and having that connection. We’re so connected via technology, but we’re so disconnected in terms of actually physically meeting other people and having those true intimate relationships. And that’s not just, you know, romantic relationships, that’s friendships, that’s family, that’s communities. So talking about that and people were like, yeah, hey, that’s me. I’m married, I have kids. I still feel lonely at times. You know, so it’s about making others feel that they’re not alone, I think often, or they’re not unique in their feelings or their struggles. I find that’s the kind of content that really resonates and actually gets a ton of engagement from the people who follow me personally anyway.

Pip Courtney [00:36:45]:

And what about you, Nick?

Nick Robinson [00:36:47]:

Oh, it’s the most popular content. Completely agree with that. Yeah for me, I’ll get pretty deep. I suppose my biggest Instagram post was 12 months ago, 14 months ago. And it was a selfie of me in hospital I sent someone because, yeah, I was in hospital because I wanted to do things I shouldn’t do to myself. And that got some 15,000 likes on an Instagram post and 900 comments and whatnot. And you can’t get more vulnerable from that post than what the caption was there. And there seems to be a direct correlation between vulnerability and engagement and what people want to see at the end of the day is just real stuff. Because social media’s just covered in so much nonsense. To see something as vulnerable as you can get is what gets people most engaged. And yeah, so posts like that, which I don’t do often, I hope, I don’t have to do it too often.

That’s the most engaging because it’s the most real and it’s in closed doors, the most relatable that isn’t discussed, I think, not to the extent that my post was, but I take that back a notch in what I try and share in general. Yeah, it’s the stuff behind closed doors that people can relate to that isn’t commonly discussed. And I think to post that stuff and be that, I don’t know, voice I suppose for some people to get over the line to have that conversation with someone or to seek the help or whatever it might be to be that stepping stone for people. Yeah, that’s my go-to content I suppose, I like to draw on and am most proud of think.

Pip Courtney [00:38:27]:

And what’s it like when you meet people like you mentioned before, who come up and say thank you for the work you do? What’s that like?

Nick Robinson [00:38:33]:

Oh, it never ever gets old. I’ve had a bloke in tears at a nightclub and it would’ve been an 18-year-old fresh in a nightclub and stuff. And it’s lovely. It never, ever get olds. When I first started social media, as I said, it was yahoo, nothing, mucking around stuff and had people come up or might have girls for instance come up and this, that and the other. I don’t have time for that. I have an incredible amount of time for people who sincerely come up and are genuinely just grateful for what I do. And the fact that I shared my story may have helped them share their story is priceless to me. And I’ve spent hours on a night out just chatting with people. I don’t know where my friends are, but to that, the experience I have there with those people, yeah, I love it every time it happens.

Pip Courtney [00:39:21]:

And Mark, we’ve got a question here for you. Are farmers finding support through social media? I mean, you talk a lot about the mechanics of farming, but do you find that you’re connecting farmers? I always find grain growers seem to be quite isolated. They might be just them and maybe one man during the season. I find grain growers seem to be very connected at this pointy end of the season.

Mark Merrett [00:39:48]:

Yeah, well, I hope that what we’re doing is connecting people. I hope that, like it’s been said, it is creating a more vulnerable space in, like a healthy vulnerability though, in agriculture because quite often, or in our area anyway, it’s like, oh no, don’t tell your neighbours what you’re doing. You want all the upper hand that you can because you might wanna buy out their farm when they can’t get going. So yeah, I hope that what we’re doing on YouTube is connecting people in an encouraging way. Like, I don’t have a group or anything to really connect people, but you see people talking in the comments and stuff like that and it is really cool to see other people answering questions and things like that. But as far as connecting, I don’t think anything compares to the Planting the Crop page that’s on Facebook. Seeing how that’s taken off and the support and connections that are made from that all around Australia and even globally, I guess is, has been incredible to see. So yeah, social media really is a big asset to agriculture or can be if we use it correctly.

Pip Courtney [00:41:16]:

And Edwina, what does your, this question from Slido, what does your local community and your friends, what do they think of your work on social media?

Edwina Robertson [00:41:24]:

I’ve never asked them to be honest. I think, look, I would like to think, okay, I feel it’s a very powerful tool and without sounding full of myself, I feel like, for instance, for me as a female, I have a lot of young female followers and I have a level of influence to what I share and to what they take in by what I say. So with that power comes obviously some responsibility. And so actually, this is something I constantly think about. I make sure what I’m sharing is beneficial for others to learn or to hear or to consider or to read, if someone might learn a lesson or connect with that. So I always wanna bring something positive out of what I post. And it is intentional. A lot of the stuff I do post it is intentional, it’s just not posting just for the sake of posting.

And I think, look, I’m a bit like Nick, you know, I can go to the supermarket to go to the airport or be in a completely different town to where I live and people will know who I am and come up and say hello and say thanks so much. And that’s really nice. I really appreciate that because it does take a lot of effort and energy to commit to posting content continuously. And particularly if you’re doing something like Mark, doing videos, the effort there is substantial. So if people acknowledge that, I think it’s really nice and it’s nice to know that you can be on the right track in doing what you do.

Pip Courtney [00:43:13]:

Is the space getting crowded? Have you guys got competition now?

Nick Robinson [00:43:21]:

I’ve never seen it as competition personally. It’s not, I guess, if you’re in the same category and you as a business like Edwina’s, it might get, I don’t know, crowded, I guess. But I think she’s got quite a niche there and she’s doing really well. She’s standing above the rest of them, so there’s no competition there. She’s just wiping the floors. But I suppose for me, in my content, it’s at the end of the day, to get it out there and share a message of put simply, to benefit other people’s mental health, I guess. And if I’ve got competition doing that, I’m happy. That’s if there’s someone else that wants to do that as well, that’s awesome. And, so for me, not so much.

Edwina Robertson [00:44:05]:

Can I just say, sorry Pip, like I know my content’s not for everyone and I’m totally okay with that. That’s fine. You know, occasionally I’ll put something up, I’ll lose some followers, also gain some followers. It’s not a, you know, they call this the, um, I’ve just had a mental blank. So it’s metrics, like the vanity metrics, sorry, you know, followers. I don’t care about all that sort of stuff. But what I do care about is the message I personally put out, that it’s intentional that it can help other people. Because where I’m at and where I’ve been and where I’ve grown and I talk about, like Nick a lot, I talk about mental health or going to therapy or dealing with childhood traumas and all this sort of stuff. I talk about that and I know for a fact there’s plenty of other people out there that are going, or will go through the same thing. So for me, if I can help one other person buy the content I put out, hey, that’s a green tick. Yeah, the vanity metrics around followers and all that sort of stuff doesn’t float my boat at all, me personally. And yeah, I don’t do it for a numbers game, I just do it to be who I am. It’s my page. I put out what I want, like it, fantastic, if you don’t, no problems, no harm done.

Mark Merrett [00:45:22]:

I think that’s the, the perfect way of putting it, Edwina. Like you’re just putting out what you like and you’ve just, I like to think of it as, for everything you like, there’s a niche. So I play the drums, I’m a farmer. There is a niche for drumming farmers, maybe a small one, but there is, and I think that’s the, the perfect way of putting it. You’re just doing what you like, you’re putting out content that you like that resonates with you. And if there’s other people doing that, everyone has a story to tell and it’s better for everyone, the more stories that are available.

Pip Courtney [00:45:59]:

Is top of mind, to all three of you, I really wanna bridge the urban rural divide? Or do you feel like your message is just, look, I’m just talking to my people, my rural people?

Nick Robinson [00:46:13]:

For me, I think a lot of people can resonate with me because the conversation isn’t very common, I guess, out in the bush, as they’d say. But I think that’s changing, which is fantastic. But I just post, as it’s been discussed, we both, all three of us have discussed it just be you, just do you and you’ll resonate with your crowd. You’re not meant to resonate with people that you aren’t meant to resonate with. And that’s fine. I’ve been strictly told that I can’t quite swear on this panel, but I like to swear in my videos and that helps me engage with the crowd of, hang on, this bloke that swears he is got a moustache, a mullet, talks to our mental health. That’s what the heck. Maybe I’ll listen to him. Sorry, I don’t know. 13, 14 to 25 year old blokes is my target market and that’s the way I engage with the best. And I’m not gonna change who I am to try and engage with other people. Because I’m gonna lose the original people I can engage with and I’m not gonna engage with the people I’m trying to as well. And that’s another market for other people to engage with. So yeah, just doing you, and that has been both in the city and out in bush. It’s both. I’ve never intended for it to be aimed at any specifics, but it’s, it’s worked evenly with both of them, I think.

Edwina Robertson [00:47:29]:

I have had some passion projects Pip. That has been the actual aim, to connect the stories and I guess the truth from between people who live in urban areas to the bush. One of my projects, Wonder of the West, where I drove around Australia for a hundred days with no money. So I bartered my photography skills for food, fuel and accommodation. And I went and stayed at stations and blogged about this and it was on 60 minutes, this story. And that for me was the best outcome because basically I wanted to show people who live in, you know, their apartments in Randwick or Bondi or wherever, in Melbourne, I wanted to show them what it’s like living in rural Australia because it is different. It is so different. You know, healthcare, education, even getting your groceries and your mail.

These are everyday necessities that are so varied compared to what someone who lives in the city experiences. So that was actually my most important task and my biggest goal in doing some of these passion projects I’ve done, purely to try and bridge that gap, because I think that’s where a lot of the divide in terms of community and awareness around agriculture in Australia is starting to really lapse or, I guess the divide is growing because if you live in the city now, you know, let’s go back a generation ago, two generations ago, everyone had an uncle who had a property in the bush, right? You lived in Sydney, but school holidays, you’d go out to Dubbo and visit your great-uncle. Those family connections or those friendships are starting to dwindle. And so people who grow up in the city don’t have any connection to the bush anymore. And that, I personally believe is why the divide between the city and the bush is actually growing.

Pip Courtney [00:49:36]:

Mark are you always thinking about, I hope somebody in Sydney watches this, maybe they’d like to change their mind about what they think about ag or maybe they’d like to come and work in ag?

Edwina Robertson [00:49:48]:

That would be amazing. Absolutely. Sorry Mark, to cut you off.

Mark Merrett [00:49:53]:

Oh no, sorry to jump in. I was gonna say I, I started out with YouTube thinking, oh yeah, I’m gonna bridge the city country divide. And I think what you’ve said is, is perfect, Edwina. The connections to the to the land are dwindling, with more of a city focus with broadacre agriculture expanding, I guess, or operations expanding. But what I’ve found along my journey a bit is how do I put this? There’s people in the city who are just not interested in agriculture, is one thing that I’ve found. And I wanted to start making my videos also, so it was a resource, so if someone searched up Australian Wheat Farm, something would come up about an Australian wheat farm. But something that I’ve found along the way is as long as the produce is still in the supermarket, as long as it’s as cheap as they can and it never runs out, these people are happy.

And I don’t have the answers. I don’t know how we can improve it, but yeah, one thing I’ve found is these people are just happy doing their life in the city. Not knowing about farming, not knowing about agriculture, not knowing where their food comes from. A farm, but knowing that’s about it. And like I said, if it’s in the supermarket, they’re happy. So I don’t know, a lot, agriculture in general tends to have a bit of a negative opinion or negative feel, I think in the media for the reason that you hear when it’s a drought, like in New South Wales in 2018 and Gippsland and everything, you hear that, oh, it’s so bad. We’re selling our sheep. We haven’t harvested any grain, all this. But nobody ever wants to say, oh check out farmer Bill down the road, he’s made record profits, he’s harvested a nine ton wheat crop. Like, it just doesn’t kind of work like that because you don’t ever promote yourself like, oh, I’m making so much money. But the reason that we promote a drought, I guess, is because it’s not just the farmers that struggle. It’s the rural communities, it’s the person who runs the hardware store in town, because if there’s no money in the area, because it’s a drought, no one’s getting any building work done, nobody’s buying any hardware, stuff. So it’s kind of a really interesting point that I like to think about and put thought in, is how do we show our city, country folk, like city people, what farming is like in a way that they want to see that they’re interested in without boring them? I don’t know. Do you understand what I’m saying? It’s an interesting point and I know I’ve rambled on it a bit, but it is something I’ve found along the way that these people there, although the resources are there, they might not actually be interested in finding out how their food is produced.

Nick Robinson [00:53:14]:

It does make sense what you’ve said.

Pip Courtney [00:53:19]:

I think what Mark does really, was he shows ag in, oh, sorry, we’re talking over each other. You go Nick.

Nick Robinson [00:53:26]:

Oh, Mark, don’t question yourself. That made a lot of sense in what you said there. It’s, yeah, it’s relatable and yeah, you made sense, mate, you didn’t ramble on. Don’t worry.

Pip Courtney [00:53:38]:

And Mark, you do a lot of your videos when times are fine, you are showing people that it’s not just farmers in drought. Your independence, you’ve got a family, you can do what you want, you’re doing what you love. I think that’s what comes through. Do you think you could encourage people who watch to maybe think about having a career in ag? Like the workforce issue is a real problem and a lot of young people would think, well, I haven’t got the money to own a farm. Are you, the way that you get across the message, you don’t have to own a farm, you just have to be interested in ag and there’s lots of jobs out here.

Mark Merrett [00:54:14]:

Yeah, well, I guess it’s never something I’ve done is promote working on a farm, I guess. But yeah, I think there definitely is possibilities there to show these young people that there’s so many opportunities on farm. If you have the drive and the work ethic to do it, there’s any amount of farmers that’ll take you on. But no farmer’s going to take on a couch potato because you’re better off doing it by yourself than employing someone who’s not gonna work. And it sounds really bad, but the long and short of it is, it’s true. Like we’re all small in small businesses or some of us are bigger than others, but you can’t afford to be spending money on something that’s not working for you. So yeah, there is some incredible opportunities in agriculture and maybe that is something in the future that I’ll do is try and encourage more people to take up farming as a career.

Pip Courtney [00:55:20]:

This is for everyone. What’s been your experience of drought? Question coming in on Slido? Or are you too young? Is it something you think about preparing for? It’s probably more for Mark rather than Edwina.

Mark Merrett [00:55:35]:

Oh okay. Yeah, so I personally haven’t been through a drought while I’ve been farming in my own right. While I was still at school. We had a couple of stinking years that were really, really tight. So yeah, but in our area we’re really secure. The land price does reflect that. Some sold for $11,000 an acre last year just down the road for me, so that’s astronomical. But anyway, yeah, drought is something I’m always conscious of, as I’d say most farmers are, because it’s always just around the corner. You just never know. It is always in the back of your mind. You’re always hoping for a good year thinking it might be dry, unfortunately. But yeah, social media and drought is an interesting one because I’ve been caught out posting photos of our good crops before and then getting comments like, oh man, I wish it would rain here so we could actually grow a crop and stuff like that. And yeah, once again, I don’t know how to deal with that because it all goes around and comes around, but you don’t want to be rubbing it in other people’s faces that we’re going really good and you are going really bad. So, I don’t know. It’s just the nature of the beast, I guess. The nature of the beast.

Pip Courtney [00:56:57]:

It’s a tricky one that one. Some American agfluencers has told me that every farmer should have, in their toolkit, just as they have their Sidchrome, whatevers, they should have social media in their toolkit. What do you three think about that, should every farmer be out there advocating, even if it’s just running into somebody at the kids’ soccer or at the footy? Should they be thinking about social media and agriculture and spreading the word about what ag does well?

Nick Robinson [00:57:28]:

Well, I think Edwina can take that. She’s the wedding photographer.

Edwina Robertson [00:57:31]:

Geez, thanks Nick. Okay, I have, this is just a personal belief of mine, I believe minority groups typically yell the loudest. So if they want change, they will yell about it and they’ll get the change they want. And that’s to the ag industry’s own detriment, something I think they need to think about and actually start doing. So, prime example, drought 2018, everyone knew it was bad, and I’m sure everyone could have done with a little bit more financial assistance and support from the government, but there wasn’t a lot coming because people weren’t, you know, asking up enough about it. And I think sometimes it goes against the personality and characteristics of rural people who don’t like to be whingers, but I think sometimes you’ve gotta do a bit more whinging if you want results. So I don’t think the ag industry, as I said, this is personal opinion, I don’t think the ag industry can expect people to learn or be educated or have more of an understanding of what happens in their industry or where their food comes from, if they’re not talking about it or they’re not actually, you know, actively doing something about it.

So that’s, that’s what I think about it. So yeah, I think social, as I said, as we’ve all said, social media has its place if it’s used correctly, and if it can be used in a way to story tell or to share all the positives in the ag industry, because there’s plenty of those. I can’t see any negatives attached to that.

Nick Robinson [00:59:17]:

And for me, I think, as generations change, we’ll use social media, it’s inevitable. It’s gone is the days of going down and getting the local paper and every single person’s got one, it’s just not the case. So I think as younger farmers come along it’ll just naturally happen. Your oldies aren’t gonna get into social media. That’s fine. Youngies probably won’t get into newspapers. That’s fine. That’s just way the world’s working, the way the world’s moving. So I think it’ll naturally find its place in ag and it’ll get used and abused by some and it’ll get used great by others. That’s just how it all works. And I think, yeah, so it will naturally find its place. It won’t be, it shouldn’t be forced. It’ll be tractors will be driving themselves soon. And I think that’ll be, it’ll just be a sign of the times that things are changing and that just, that’ll just happen.

Pip Courtney [01:00:04]:

And there’s a nice comment here, not a question, a comment come in on Slido. No question, just admiring the passion in these young people for the ag industry. Love your work guys. So hat tip there for you.

Nick Robinson [01:00:16]:

Thank you. Can I just make a quick Comment? Sorry Pip, just based off the drought question. Sorry, Mark. As I don’t have any experience going through a drought, but from that second video that we saw earlier, I think his name was Scott, and his very last comments were regarding the support from the people around you are the most important thing. And I think that just comes back to the importance of the people that you have in your life and who’s around you. And as I like to do and what I practice is the mental health side of things and the wellbeing side of things is, yeah, get the people around you that support you and create your circle and be a part of a circle. That is what you want to be a part of. Doesn’t have to be big at all. It’s just the importance of surrounding yourself in those that support you and what you’re doing. As Scott said in the end of that video, that is the most important thing in a drought. Yeah. You can only keep your fingers crossed so long for rain and you have to start looking for other things to keep you going. And usually that’s the people around you. So that was something I wanted to chime in on the, the drought side of things.

Pip Courtney [01:01:19]:

Well thank you all three. Nick, don’t get rid of the mullet or the mo. Mark, don’t get a shampoo company to pay you lot of money to chop that beautiful long hair off. And Edwina, keep telling those personal stories. We do enjoy them.

Nick Robinson [01:01:36]:

Thanks Pip.

Pip Courtney [01:01:37]:

Thank you very much for your contributions.

Nick Robinson [01:01:40]:

Thank you.

Pip Courtney [01:01:41]:

A lot of great energy from a new generation of farmers there. I think it’s time for a cup of tea. We’ll take a 15-minute break and pick up at a quarter past two to talk about tools for change, including some already helping make life easier, whatever the weather. See you shortly.

[Recording ends]

**Acknowledgement of Country**

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of Australia and their continuing connection to land and sea, waters, environment and community. We pay our respects to the Traditional Custodians of the lands we live and work on, their culture, and their Elders past and present.

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