When in Drought

Interview with South Australian farmers Tim Paschke and John Gladigau

Farming is a tough job on a good year, but even harder when facing severe drought. So, what happens when your livelihood depends on rain that just doesn't come?

'When it doesn't rain it's pretty challenging. So, in a year like this where we have, you know, about a third of our annual rainfall, you just can't grow enough feed or crop to sustain the bank.'

'There's an inherent risk that's in farming that's not in other jobs. I mean, in some ways it's like any business where there's that inherent risk. But with agriculture it's like at a whole different level.'

Jo: I'm Jo Chamberlain, and you are listening to Messages of hope. Today I am talking to two farmers from rural South Australia about the realities of farming during serious drought, and where they find hope when year after year the rain doesn't fall.

Tim's Farm

I have with me Tim Paschke, he's got generations worth of farming in his blood, and so we'd love to hear more about his story and about what is happening in the farming situation in Australia today.

So, welcome, Tim.

Tim: How are you going?

Jo: Yeah, going well, thank you. How are you going?

Tim: We're harvesting at the moment, so it's a busy time of my year.

Jo: So, Tim, tell me about yourself and your farm.

Tim: We own 1600 hectares here of dry land farming in 10-inch rainfall. And we run merino sheep as well. We've also expanded into leasing a heap of country, so we are up to about 6,000 hectares, or 16,000 acres.

Jo: So, on your property, how long would it take to get from one end to the other?

Tim: Well, we have a spread of about 30km, so in a tractor it takes about an hour.

We pretty much crop, if we can, a hundred percent of the acreage. And then we run sheep on a small percentage and in feed lots and things like that. But with the current drought that we've had, it's the third year in a row that we've had below average rainfall, and it's six out of eight years that has been pretty crook for us. So, we've still got 300 ewes, but yeah, we're down from a thousand. And we're still harvesting, but yeah, it's not paying the bills at the moment.

Jo: So, what happens, for farms that are in drought? Tell me a bit more about that.

Tim: Well, money's tight, obviously. It's really expensive to be a farmer in this generation. We have some big gear, but, you know, it all costs money. In terms of chemical and fertilizer and fuel, running costs, machinery, everything's gone up three or four times. But we're getting the same price for grain that we got back in…in 1983, the price of grain was actually more than is this year. So, we have to grow more on less, which we do, but, it's not enough this year obviously.

Jo: I get that farmers have to be pretty resilient when it comes to farming. You just don't know what you're gonna get, do you?

Tim: That's a real challenge for us as farmers because we love what we do. We love growing, we love producing, we love looking after the land and sheep, and growing sustainable wool. But at the end of the day, a lot of it doesn't pay the bills.

Jo: So why do it?

Tim: Oh, you know, it's a real generational legacy, I suppose. It is not all bad. But you know, when it doesn't rain, it's pretty challenging. But, yeah, we do enjoy growing stuff to feed the nation.

John's Farm

Jo: Like Tim, John Gladigau comes from a multi-generational farming background, but John's approach to farming has been a bit different over the years. John, tell us about your farming history.

John: Well, our family came here in 1956 actually - my dad and his grandpa. And they came from the Adelaide Hills - four sons, and a not big enough property in the hills. So they came looking for some cheap country, I suppose, to farm on, and came up here in 1956, which is the land of milk and honey that year in the flood year. And probably they may have been conned a little bit thinking that was how it was all the time.

They came up here and in their first three years were droughts and rabbit plagues. And, in fact, in 1957, their first year here, they caught so many rabbits that they paid the interest bill on the farm just out of rabbits.

The farm then sort of grew over time. And I was really fortunate in that my dad, he very early, involved me in the management of the farm, and I don't think you always see that in farming operations, and was quite happy to hand over some of the responsibility. And we sort of did it together. That was really good for me that I could actually have that input from an early age.

So we went through a real period where, I guess I was really starting to ask questions about the future. I was seeing neighbours buying out neighbours, the community's getting smaller and smaller, and, I guess left me to ask the question: 'Where are we gonna be in 10 years time? Am I gonna own my neighbor's property was he gonna own mine?' And that became a really big thing for me, as in what is my future? And so I started looking at ways that we could create efficiencies and economies of scale. And I was very focused on, well, we just need to work together more like, could we share labour? Could we share machinery?

And so, I was asking lots of questions through that time and ended up with the extraordinary privilege to receive a Nuffield scholarship to travel the world in 2007, looking at collaborative farming, which is the idea of taking farms and putting them together and running them as one. So, I had 16 weeks traveling the world, literally the entire world from North to South America, Asia, New Zealand, looking at collaborative farming. And when I came home, we joined together with Robin and Rebecca Schaefer to set up Bulla Burra which is a large-scale collaborative farm.

Basically I went from being a hundred percent owner of a 5,000 acre farm to becoming a 50% shareholder in a farm that ended up cropping 25,000 acres. It was quite an amazing journey. We were one of the first people in the world to do that. So I guess everyone was looking at us waiting for it to fail. You know, farmers are good at that. We just sort of say, 'yeah, that won't work…you just watch, they'll go broke.' So it was a huge risk. And of course, the scale of this exasperates risk as well. But it became a really successful model. And part of the process, part of that journey, I suppose, we actually helped set up other farms around Australia who ended up doing the same.

Farming in drought

Jo: So, you know, I hear that one year of drought is pretty devastating and two years of drought, almost unthinkable. But three years now you've been in drought, haven't you? So how are you going with that?

Tim: When it doesn't rain it, it's pretty challenging. So in a year like this where we have, you know, about a third of our annual rainfall, you just can't grow enough feed or crop to sustain the bank I suppose. This is the worst of the three because it's connected with a huge amount of wind. This year has been the windiest year that we can remember ever. And that has caused huge damage to our fences, to our paddocks. Our paddocks are so rough and scalloped out, there's big holes out in the paddocks. We have some of the, the fragilest sand in Australia. It's so fragile that where you go with a spray plant, the wind then grabs it and takes it away.

Jo: I mean, I'm hearing some pretty dire stories here. How bad has it got for you?

Tim: We're in a world of pain really. But at the same time, we have a faith. And for us, we're very thankful for what we've received. The way we farm these days, it's a lot different than the old days where you'd reap nothing. That's the challenge for us is when you're driving along and you know, you've still got a crop, to be thankful for that, but also the reality that you're not making enough money to pay the bills, which is a real challenge.
And so, it's a bit of a mental thing, but yeah, it's been a really tough gig the last few years. And it's not getting easier.

Jo: John, your community is in their third year of drought now, and I'm wondering, are there farmers who are just getting to the point of throwing in the towel and giving up?

John: Yes, that certainly does happen. And sometimes people make that decision and say, 'I just can't do this anymore.' But there's plenty of other occasions where that decision is made for you. Because the financiers just say, 'no, I'm not gonna support you anymore.' And that's really, really tough, because, you know, for most farmers, they actually don't know any other life. **It's not like a normal life, and it's not like something where you can just go get another, get another job. It is your everything.**

Jo: And what about you, Tim? Have you ever gotten to the point of saying it's all too hard and it's time to give up?

Tim: Definitely this year. So I'm a musician as well. I'm a guitarist and I play at church in here at our little church at Lowbank. And there's some days that I would rock up on a Sunday morning after a dust storm, and it was pretty much every 7 to 10 days, and it was horrendous. Our house would fill up with dirt and it'd come in underneath the doors and it would be terrible**. It was really hard to turn up and actually praise God.**

But you know, there's one song that we sing, 'Goodness of God,' it's just about how he's always being there for you. And I suppose even through our biggest trials and tribulations, we've still got so much to be thankful for; we've got good health and we've got healthy kids and it's not windy every day. So, yeah, we turn around and go again because no one else is going do the job either. So, it gives us the strength in that, I suppose.
There's always a joke that as God's testing our patience. And I'm like, well you know what, I'd really like him to test me with a bit of money one time, just see how that goes!

Jo: Yeah, I guess in those times, I guess it is harder to see God in that. But then how much of farming has to do with God in the factor of trust? How much do you have to trust God in farming?

God and farming

Tim: I put a seed in the ground and I've got to fully trust that the Lord is gonna provide; 'give us today our daily bread,' it's right there. And that's exactly what I do as a farmer. And it's no different than when we lamb, you know, you have lambs on the ground, then we've gotta trust that God's gonna provide the feed, either in grain or in green feed in paddocks. But he's also given us the knowledge to manage that, I suppose. And so we do that to our best ability. **But there's always curve balls that come out in farming. You rarely know what's tomorrow gonna bring.**

Jo: So I guess having that faith is that little element of knowing somebody else is in control here. And you can trust to that point.

Tim: Yeah, we can only do so much. We are working flat out with the harvest at the moment. The reality is, it might come through and a hailstorm comes through or whatever, but you know, we can only do so much as ourselves. And we manage it, to the best ability that we've been given.

Jo: So, John, what about you? What role does faith play for you as a farmer?

John: I find it hard to contemplate being a farmer and not be a Christian because it is all about hope and trust you know. Like, the Lord will provide. And if I didn't have that, I dunno how I'd handle a lot of that because you're basically saying, 'well here you go, God. I've done my bit.' I mean, I've gotta do my management side, sure. But if the rain doesn't come from the sky, if the frost comes, all of that is outta my hands. And so, **I live in hope. I live in trust. And that does carry you through most times.**

But you know, when you have one drought, two droughts, three droughts, I think certainly it is tough. It's tough being a Christian in that environment too, because you start saying to God: 'you're meant to provide. Why are we going through these really tough times right now?'
Jo: Do you ever have those moments where you go, 'where are you, God?'
John: Oh, absolutely. Probably not publicly so much. But certainly absolutely. And you think, 'where are you? Why aren't you…? It's a bit like when someone's ill or whatever, you

say, ‘why me? Why us?’ But in farming, it's like the same thing. We've had two droughts in a row and now we've stepped out in faith to do it again. And the third one's worse than the first two. And you do say, ‘what are you doing to me? Are you actually there?’

As a Christian, I think that's normal. I don't think that means that you've lost faith as such. I think it's just a normal process of what it means to walk that, and to be on that journey. And I think that's why it's really important to be talking with others as well, and to be expressing that, and sharing that, and hopefully building each other through that, which is really important. That connection is really important.

Supporting the farming community

Jo: So, what's the best thing that we can do as a community to rally around farmers who are doing it tough?

Tim: It's just an understanding, I suppose. We've been really blessed with different financial stuff from different relief agencies this year and from local churches, they've been really giving in that respect. But yeah, it's really just understanding that we are going through extremely difficult time. And supporting Australian stuff is actually really important. Like if there's something that's 20 cents more a bag, or a dollar, supporting that Australian grown stuff is really important.

They're the couple of different things, but it's just that understanding. And if there is an opportunity, keep in touch with some people that might be doing it pretty tough at the moment.

If you do have a faith, prayer is something that me and my wife practice. And that alone is extremely good for your soul. So, again, just handing that over to God. And I sleep very well because of that. And say, ‘look, I've done as much as I can. The rest is in your hands.’ And off it goes.

Finding hope from the Bible

Jo: Is there any scripture that comes to mind when you think about the hope you have in God?

Tim: I'm not real good with scripture, I'm better with songs.

Jo: You said ‘the Goodness of God’ before?

Tim: Yeah, but the other one is ‘Praise’. I think it says, ‘I'll praise you in the valleys, and I'll praise you on the mountains. I praise you when I feel good and praise you when I don't.’

And the reality is, we do praise him when we feel like it. And then, you know, the key is to praise him when you don't. And that then that was, I guess, for me, a real challenge. But we'll get there.

Jo: What about you, John? What does God mean to you in all of this?

John: Well as a farmer, you see God everywhere. You see him in the sunsets, you see him in the sunrise, you see him in the trees. And God is new life. You plant a seed in the ground and then out of this seed, this thing emerges. And so, as a Christian, I think that's where a lot of my God journey is, is seeing it through nature and seeing it through my farming. And that's something I treasure. I’d say it is because of that that the hope comes through as well because, if God can create that life which turns into a wheat crop, which I can then

harvest, I can't do that on my own. I can only do the bits that I can do, and then I'm relying on, God to do the rest.
Jo: Does scripture come to mind when you think about these things? Is there a particular verse that sustains you?

John: Yeah I guess there's a few, I suppose. One my favourites is Psalm 121: 'I lift my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come?' I just think it's such a beautiful verse and it's something that always gives me inspiration in the morning. But even the whole concept of 'not a sparrow falls from the sky…the hairs of your head are counted.' And I think especially when you're going through the tough times and you're thinking, 'who am I? I'm so insignificant. I don't matter.' To know that, actually, I feel like I'm insignificant, but actually I'm not.

How can we support farmers?

Jo: So, as somebody who is advocating for your community, is there something for us as a community that we need to know? How can we rally around farmers?

John: I think it's as much about looking to understand what farmers are about and not so much to put farmers on that big pedestal. We are all important. But just knowing that farmers do live a different type of life, and they do carry different type of risks as well and they're not always understood. Because of that, farmers tend to hold that really close cos they don't think that people understand. **We're not expecting your pity, we're not expecting your money, we are not expecting anything like that. But we'd like to share our stories. We'd like to have understanding. And it's as much about us as farmers having understanding of the life that you might live**.

So, I think that the sharing stories thing is really important. So, if you meet a farmer or you know a farmer, just go and ask them about what they do. But don't just say, 'things are obviously bad. Tell me about the bad stuff.' Talk about the positives, talk about the things that are great about being a farmer. Talk about the flexibility it gives, about the hope that it gives. I think they're the conversations that are really, really important to have. And through that, you can open up and have an understanding about the challenges as well. But don't just focus on the challenges, focus on the good stuff.

Favourite thing about farming

Jo: So, Tim, tell me what's your favourite thing about farming?

Tim: I love seeing how you put this little seed in the ground, and you can put fertiliser and you can have no weeds, and then, we can't supply the rain, so God has to do that. And then in five or six months there's a harvest (sometimes). But there's always something.

I love to see the change of the seasons. I love when summer's gone because summer's a terrible time to work out in the sun. And I love the smell of the rain when you're tilling the earth. That smell of wet dirt when you're putting the crop into wet dirt, which we haven't done for a number of years, but hopefully next year. And then just seeing that growth and the blossoming, especially canola and stuff when it comes out in yellow flowers.

We see a lot of sunrises and sunsets as farmers, and that there alone is pretty incredible. Just the way the colours and the sun and the clouds dance. And **even last night, I got out the header at about midnight, and I looked up and there was not the moon, there wasn't any clouds and it was just all stars. And you're just going, we are just here in our own little part of our lives and there's this universe around us, and we believe that God put every one of those stars in the sky. And so, he is gonna look after you at the same time.**

Jo: Well, thank you to both John Gladigau and Tim Paschke for sharing about their lives as farmers in the Riverland. If you'd like to hear more stories of everyday Australians finding hope in challenging times, visit our website messagesofhope.org au.

If you were impacted by this story, we encourage you to share it with someone else you know, and reach out to us, because we'd love to hear how our messages are bringing hope.