Speaker 1:

Welcome to AgVic Talk, keeping you up to date with information from Agriculture Victoria.

Drew:

Most farmers at one stage or another contend with dry seasons and drought. How they cope though often comes down to being prepared and awareness for the support systems that can be accessed to help them through. That was the case for second generation Gippsland farmer Peter Young, who produces wool, lamb and beef on their 550-hectare farm at Briagolong, some 60 kilometres west of Bairnsdale. After three tough years, there've finally been some good rains and things are looking up for Peter, who now joins me in the AgVic Talk studio. Peter, thanks for your time.

Peter Young:

My pleasure.

Drew:

Peter, you and your family have been farming in that part of the world for some time. How long exactly?

Peter Young:

Dad took possession of this property on the 1st of October 1950.

Drew:

So in that time, you've probably seen quite a few variations in seasons.

Peter Young:

Yes, we've seen the whole lot, I reckon.

Drew:

So dry seasons weren't particularly uncommon for want of a better term.

Peter Young:

They're nothing new.

Drew:

But three years ago you had more of an extreme one, from what I understand.

Peter Young:

In the three years up until end of January this year, it would have to be the worst one we've had.

Drew:

What did you actually see Peter, in terms of declining rainfall?

Peter Young:

Down to less than half. The major bit was that it was in dribs and drabs that were never enough to get anything going. So it was very difficult to grow a fodder crop or grow any grass because you might get 10 or 15 mills and then nothing for another three weeks when the ground's already dry.

Drew:

What sort of impact then did that have on your operation? You've got 550 hectares there with a lot of animals on it. What was the impact on you?

Peter Young:

Initially, we had enough fodder in reserve, but it meant over time that we had to continue to sell livestock and continue to buy feed.

Drew:

So how much livestock did you end up having to sell off Peter?

Peter Young:

We got rid of one third of our sheep and three quarters of our cattle.

Drew:

They're fairly significant numbers.

Peter Young:

Yes. It has a pretty big impact on the bottom line, I know that, especially when you're buying feed at the same time.

Drew:

During that time, did you and your wife Alison start thinking about, well, okay, how are we going to manage this if this continues on?

Peter Young:

Yeah, we sure did. One of the best bits of advice I received was to actually make a decision. It doesn't matter if you change it later, but if you make the decision, for example, to sell a mob of sheep at the end of October, you always felt a lot better because you had actually made a decision. Putting it off and hoping and all those things didn't help at all. But to actually make a decision and say, right, it's now end of September, if it hasn't rained within the month, significant rain within the month, X number of sheep are on the truck. And that's what we were able to do. Still didn't want to do it, but at least you'd made a decision and you stop worrying about it.

Drew:

But also, did you look beyond that in terms of what other assistance you might be able to get to help you keep on going or even modify the property to deal with dry conditions?

Peter Young:

Well, initially the first assistance that was available was the farm household assistance, but more pertinent to the longer term was some of the resilience assistance that was available, things like stock containment areas, water reticulation, things like that.

Drew:

Were they difficult processes to go through Peter? And also something unusual for you to go through too, because had you ever needed to seek that sort of assistance in the past?

Peter Young:

Well, no, we hadn't. The hardest part initially was with the farm household assistance FHA, getting all the required information together, it was quite extensive. Later on when the systems got themselves sorted out, it was a lot simpler to apply for help or to ask for help. By the time we got to the resilience grants, it was relatively straight forward.

Drew:

I understand Alison, your wife had a big part in terms of working through some of those processes.

Peter Young:

Yep. She's the one that understands that a lot better than me. And I'm sure there's a lot of wives who do the same thing as part of a partnership.

Drew:

Outside of that too, what about Rural Finance? Were they able to help you work your way through these processes as well?

Peter Young:

Rural Finance were excellent in their assistance for some of the support programs, like the emergency water grants and things like that, they were really good.

Drew:

So Peter, in terms of the Victorian Government drought support, what did you do to try and help set up the property better to cope with the ongoing dry conditions?

Peter Young:

Although we have good water here, we ended up with about, I think a dozen dams that were empty. We had them cleaned out, took the opportunity to clean them out. So that was part of it, so that they would actually hold more water in the future. And we also put in that extra water bore and integrated reticulation scheme so that we can put water into dams, water into troughs. The water bores are connected and then the stock containment areas were able to hang off the side of that as well, with good water in there.

Drew:

So Peter, in terms of moving ahead, if the conditions had remained dry, would have you been able to continue farming at your de-stock level with these modifications?

Peter Young:

Well, they certainly would have helped because at the time it was looking dry. We've still got the extra fodder that we bought over the summer, but we haven't had to use it yet. So, if we were preparing for another, at least six months at the time that we received some long-awaited rain, shall we say.

Drew:

I imagine that would have been a significant change for you. I mean, it's an obvious thing to say, but how did that make you feel going from feeding and constantly planning to deal with dry conditions, how did that affect you personally?

Peter Young:

I guess there were several effects. One, a great relief. At last, it's rained. The paddocks aren't brown and dusty. They've now got a little bit of green on them. Once we had sufficient feed to put the stock back out on the paddocks, the thing that took me a little while to adjust to was this fact of, I don't have to spend half a day, every day feeding livestock. So, the pressure was off, but you had to decide what you were going to do. I know that sounds ridiculous, but when the drought was on, you knew what you had to do every day. Once we weren't doing that, it took a while to adjust to say, Well, I'll need to repair that fence or do this job or do that job. So mentally, that was a bit of a shift.

Drew:

Have you been able to connect though with your community as much? You would have been hoping for the relief that the rain brought and maybe that would bring some sort of sense of normality, but now we’ve got the current situation and also your broader community recovering from bushfires. So, I imagine things at present aren’t quite what you may have imagined them to have been when you got past the drought.

Peter Young:

Yes. One of the changes I noticed during the drought was even though everybody was flat out doing what they had to do to survive, every now and then you'd get a random phone call from somebody just to say, "How are you going?" Previous to that, we would be just busy doing whatever and we'd meet at workshops or other organisational meetings of any kind, have a quick conversation then, but because we're all so busy, I noticed and I tried to do it myself, ring somebody just, "Oh, I better ring Billy Blogs, see how he's going." So that was one significant change. And now with the coronavirus of course, well, there's no face to face contact, so the telephone's still pretty important and meetings on Zoom are good, but they're not quite the same.

Drew:

No, it's not the same as that face to face contact at all, Peter. And I understand also you used to open your property up for field day type events as well. So, you're not getting that interaction either I'd imagine.

Peter Young:

No, no. And nor are the people who would often attend those field days, discussion groups, whatever. And I was happy to share what we do in the way of, oh, well we put in a bit of summer crop or a bit of this or a bit of that, trying to generate some feed for the stock. Happy to share what we learnt and pick the brains of others and put it all together, hopefully.

Drew:

In terms of sharing what you have learnt over the last few years, if there was a key message or two to somebody listening to this, going through similar, tough, dry times, what would a key bit of advice be Peter?

Peter Young:

Keep talking, make that phone call. Even if you're not feeling that flash, find out how your neighbour’s going. And if he's a good listener, he'll pick up that things aren't going too well for yourself. So, it's an opportunity to download. And also, there's plenty of professional help, either medical, financial, planning and counselling type things, if you feel you need it. One of the things I guess has changed is that it's not weak. It's not a negative thing to ask for help. It can still be difficult.

Drew:

Well Peter, it sounds like asking for help has been absolutely crucial for you setting your property up for a future to continue on following 70 years now in that patch of land.

Peter Young:

That's right. Yeah. Be a bit negative, we're better prepared for the next drought. We will have another drought. That's the thing, Drew. Even though we've got a fantastic season at the moment, all the water holes are full. The grass is growing, the sheep are fat and the cattle. It's now that we need to prepare for the next drought, and we will have one, I guarantee it.

Drew:

Peter Young, it sounds like you've been on a very significant journey over the last three years. And it sounds like you are well and truly prepared for another drought. Let's both hope that that's a very long way away. Thank you ever so much for your time in joining me in the AgVic Talk studio.

Peter Young:

My pleasure Drew.

Speaker 1:

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