PREPARING WITH HINDSIGHT

Reflections of real farmers from before, during & after drought

SOUTHERN NSW
Innovation Hub
SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE, LANDSCAPES AND COMMUNITIES

LOCATION
"Wybalena"
Holbrook | NSW

OWNER/OPERATORS INTERVIEWED
Daniel Mathie

PROPERTY SIZE
3,470ha

ENTERPRISES
Beef Cattle

INTRODUCTION

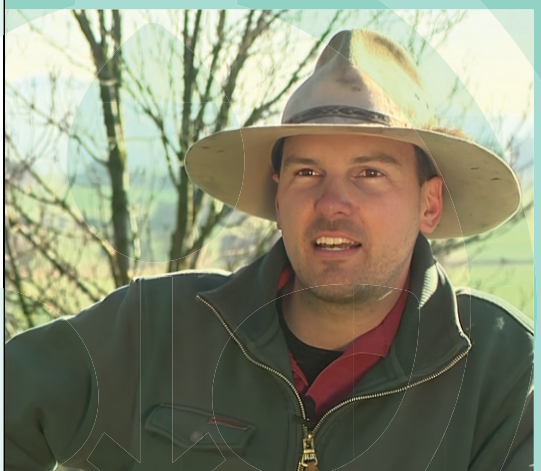
The Mathie family operate a beef farming enterprise across three properties near Holbrook, Batlow and Woomargama in southern NSW. Rainfall is variable, with an annual average around 700 mm. The farm is home to a 2200 self-replacing Angus-based composite beef cow herd.

Additional cattle are brought in opportunistically to take advantage of surplus feed. The Mathie family farms are comanaged by two generations with Daniel's younger siblings likely to also return to the family farm after they finish school. The farm also has one employee.

Price risk and seasonal risk are the greatest challenges.

The biggest challenges the Mathie's identify for their farm is price risk and seasonal risk. Price risk is largely managed through forward-selling stock direct to the supermarket chains. Stock move directly from farm to abattoir minimising stock handling and stress.

To Daniel, drought resilience is about being able to see through to the other side of the drought, being well prepared, acting on those preparations and emerging on the other side in a good or stronger position than before. Setting good habits around budgeting on the way through and taking the time to reflect on learnings so that you do it better next time around. Looking after yourself and those around you.



Daniel Mathie

Mental well-being is critical – good mental health, looking after yourself and those around you – maintaining a positive mindeset.

EXPERIENCE OF DROUGHT & BUILDING RESILIENCE

The Mathie family have learnt a lot over recent droughts and have invested significantly to be able to do drought better.

In 2002-3, they fed stored silage which worked ok. In 2007-8 they again fed silage and learnt to drought lot their cattle building a large renfinement area. But when they ran out of silage, they had to turn to grain. When they did their budgets, they realised it wasn't going to work out and made the tough decision to sell all but core stock. It took time to recover and build up their stock numbers again.

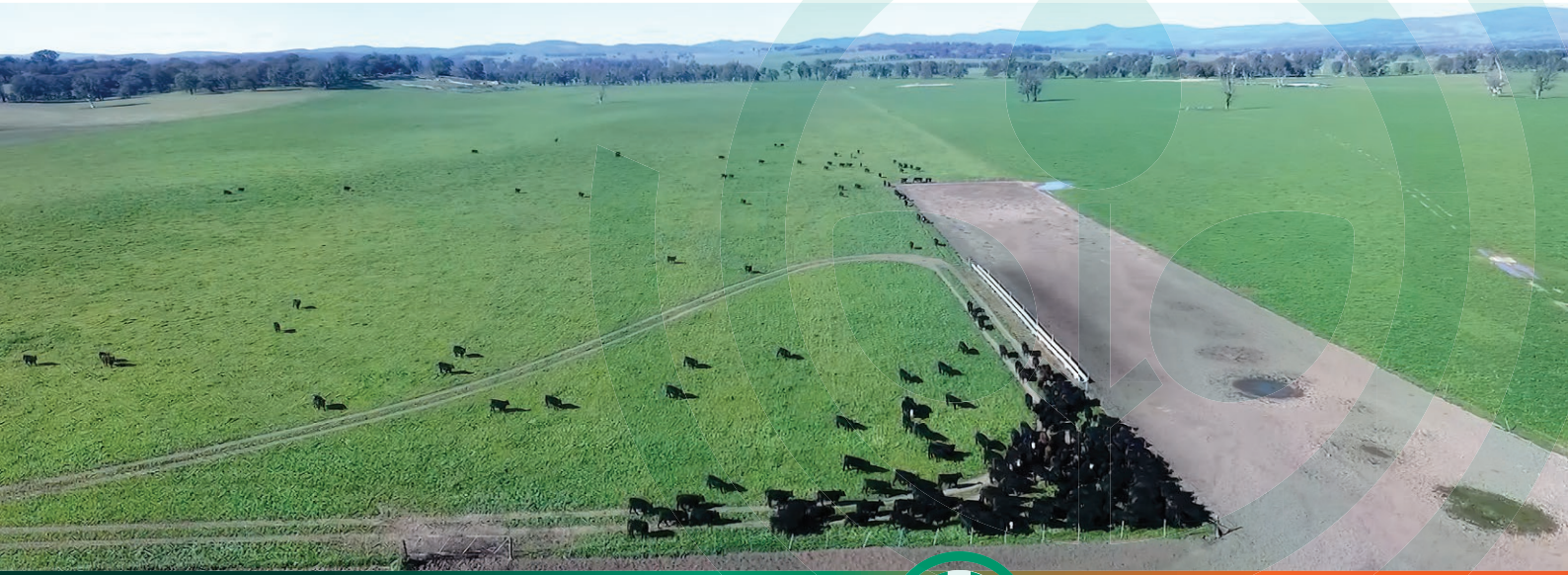
dried distillers grain and barley maltings broadening their ability to use a wider range of feed products and enable feeding of a mixed ration to stock including silage, hay, grain and the feed by-products. This also made greater use of their grain roller and mixer wagon that was purchased previously.

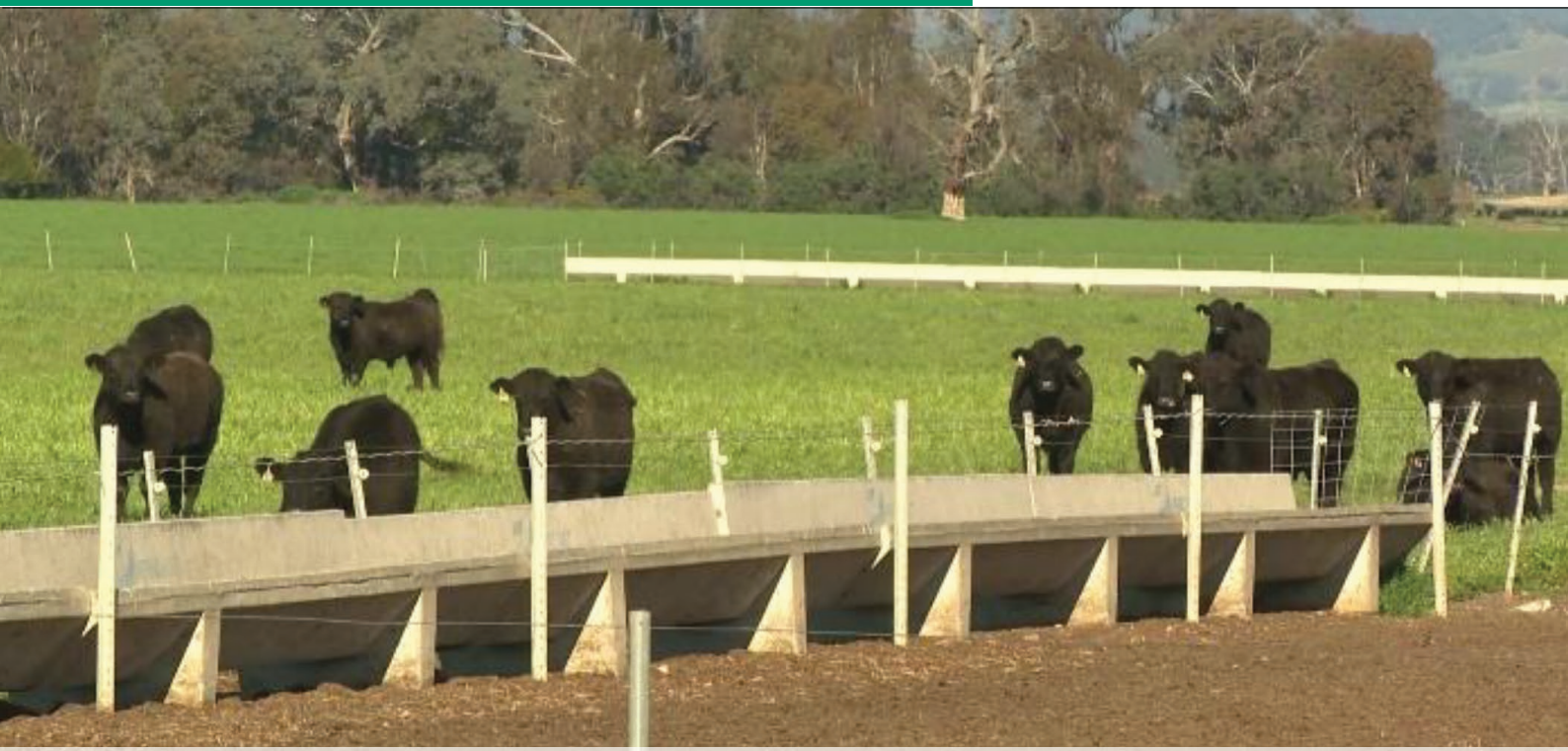
They also invested to a major upgrade to their water system which included new bores, solar pumps, tanks and large dams. They also bought a lot of hay and canola silage due to its high availability on the back of widespread crop failure.

> ***Out west, farmers are getting better at conserving moisture (more reliable crops). Where crops failed, they made hay – lots around. Livestock can take advantage of hay or downgraded grain.***

Come 2018-19, again the Mathie's shifted the focus from silage to grain. However, they were much better prepared this time. They invested in a commodity storage shed which stores grain and feed by-products such as canola meal,

Beef prices were also favourable meaning they were able to maintain their stock numbers and finish their cattle. Further, they found that their system was so efficient, and they were so well prepared that they traded stock throughout the drought, finishing cattle others couldn't finish and maintaining quality product into the supermarket chains along with cash flow.





The Mathie's are trying to place themselves in a solid financial and feed position by taking on more agistment andbuilding stock numbers,

By the time the 2018-19 drought hit the Mathie's had a complete drought management system ready to go. Whilst still stressful and massively labour intensive, they were relatively comfortable compared to previous droughts, emerging in a solid financial position with rapidly responding pastures due to the protection of ground cover as a result of stock removal. They admit they still learnt a lot from the last drought, particularly around managing animal health, critical machinery maintenance and operator fatigue.

In preparing for future droughts, the Mathie's are trying to place themselves in a solid financial and feed position, taking on more agistment, building stock numbers, storing a large amount of silage and hay and maximising profit while possible during these wetter years.

Support during drought

The Mathie's were fortunate and astute enough to apply for an Industry innovation grant that helped them with the development of their commodity shed, a key piece of infrastructure that has assisted them to efficiently feed a large number of stock during drought. From here they have developed an innovative feeding system that maximises cost and labour efficiency as well as animal health.

The Mathie's also accessed a transport rebate for stock off on agistment but little else.

From the surrounding professional community, the Mathie's accessed a local agronomist, their bank manager and accountant from time to time. They confess to drawing on the experiences of family members and drawing on many parts of the surrounding community for support and advice.

Free money is nice but not needed for us in 2018-19 because cattle prices were ok."

THE FUTURE ... AND WHAT ROLE CAN THE SNSW HUB PLAY

Ultimate Hub success as viewed by Daniel would be that farms and farm managers are better prepared for drought – they have strategies in place and they carry them out when drought hits.

Between droughts, the Hub needs to support farmers to improve productivity and efficiency – ensuring a strong financial position. Importantly, the Hub needs to be easily accessible, articularly when drought hits, so people have someone to talk to.

Specifically, Daniel identified 3 foci for the Hub...

1) Offering quality resources for drought preparedness – there is so much information out there, having it in one spot would help.

2)Having knowledgeable and approachable people that you can ring up to point you in the right direction (people with life experience)

3) Mental health and community well-being role – an integrated part of the Hub.

Specifically, these topics would include RD&E on containment feeding and containment yard design, budgeting feed storage needs and methods of reducing operating costs and maximising efficiency leading up to and during drought.

Daniel wants to understand trigger points better – when to remove stock from the paddock, when to sell cattle. Pasture management and new varieties is a key factor, particularly looking at pasture water use efficiency. Understanding enterprise mixes as well as opportunities around insurance against adverse weather conditions.

Daniel is looking forward to seeing the Hub put on a mix of field days, experts and face to face interactions as well as hosting a website that is easy to navigate with relevant information.

Daniel really wants access to top-notch experts who can help nut out particulars (not generalised statements).

CLICK HERE for the video story of the Mathie's at Wybalena

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STAY IN TOUCH

Click to **EMAIL** the HUB

Click to visit the **WEBSITE**

PREPARING WITH HINDSIGHT

Preparing with Hindsight was a community engagement project conducted by Southern NSW Drought Resilience Adoption and Innovation Hub partner - the Farming Systems Group Alliance – consisting of FarmLink Research, Central West Farming Systems, Riverine Plains, Southern Growers, Irrigated Cropping Council, Irrigation Research and Extension Committee and Holbrook Landcare Group. The project resulted in the collection of experiences of a range of landholders through the stages of pre-drought, in drought and drought recovery from the 2018/19 event. It will contribute to the Hub's focus on working with farmers and communities to identify how we can increase our resilience to drought. A series of seven case studies was created as a part of the engagement project.

This project received funding from the Australian Government's Future Drought Fund.

Australian Government
Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

Future Drought Fund

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