

AgJournal

AUSTRALIA'S AGRIBUSINESS MAGAZINE

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HOME: IMPACT
OF WAR**

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THINKING

STEPPING
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DAIRY'S FROTH
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OUTBACK HEROINES

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AUSTRALIAN AGRICULTURE

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RISING STARS

Women are increasingly stepping into the roles that are transforming agriculture, writes SUE SMETHURST

LIV Falkiner doesn't miss a beat as she muses about the performance of her family's Merino sheep, the challenges of growing cotton and the biodiversity measures she's implementing to protect native wetlands around their property, all while nursing five-month-old baby Matilda in one arm, and settling an attention-seeking Kelpie with the other.

"Agriculture changes so quickly that you must always have an eye to the horizon, and innovation is essential across every enterprise we are in," Falkiner says. "We are constantly trying to be ahead of the curve, anticipate challenges and prepare for them."

Juggling multiple hats at once is all in a day's work for the 33 year old who manages one of Australia's most successful enterprises, Haddon Rig, a Merino, broadacre cropping and cotton station 140km northwest of Dubbo in NSW.

Falkiner is among a growing number of women rising through the leadership ranks of Australian agriculture. From small family farms to vast cattle stations, corporate and institutional agribusiness, women with a clear focus on driving innovation and production across the sector are shaping contemporary agriculture and redefining the \$100 billion industry.

"You have to keep evolving to survive in agriculture, you can't rest on any aspect of the business," says Falkiner.

WOMEN have always been the backbone of Australian agriculture, their efforts critical to the success of Australian farms, particularly family run operations. Think of pioneers such as Mary and Elizabeth Durack who managed Ivanhoe Station near Kununurra in the 1920s and '30s.

But their work was often undervalued and underpaid, and

incredibly, it's only since 1994 that women were legally considered 'farmers' and able to list their occupation as farmer in the census.

Thankfully, Australian agriculture has moved ahead in leaps and bounds, and according to the most recent figures from the Australian Bureau of Agricultural Resource Economics and Sciences, more than 88,000 women work in the nation's agricultural sector, making up almost 35 per cent of the total agriculture workforce.

Cressida Cains, president of Australian Women in Agriculture, says the stereotype of an Australian farmer, being an old bloke in a dusty Akubra, is finally shifting, but there's still work to be done.

"That image still exists, but it's no longer the full picture," she says.

"Across Australia, women are farming, leading businesses, driving innovation and shaping the direction of the industry, often in ways that are practical, collaborative and forward-looking. The reality on the ground has shifted quite significantly, even if the public perception is still catching up.

"Better decisions are made when the people around the table reflect the reality of the industry. Women bring different perspectives, experiences and ways of thinking about risk, people and long-term sustainability. In agriculture, where decisions have generational impact, that diversity matters. It's not just about representation, it's about stronger, more balanced and more effective leadership."

DAWN has barely broken in Indonesia, and Tracey Hayes is already perched in front of her laptop, taking the first of what will be any number of meetings throughout



LIV FALKINER

CONTINUED PAGE 14

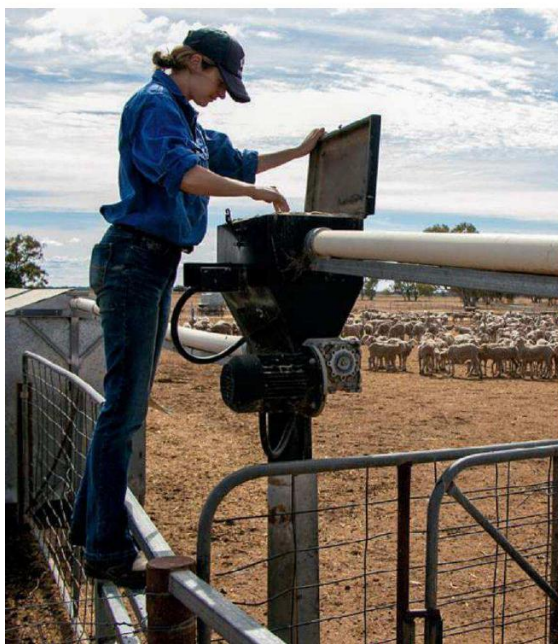


TRACEY HAYES



LISA SHARP

Cover Story



Liv Falkiner from Haddon Rig Merino stud at Warren in NSW, left. Former NT Cattle Association boss Tracey Hayes, right. Picture: Glenn Campbell

FROM PAGE 12

the course of her day, even though she is technically on holiday.

In front of her, the laptop, a phone and watch, hosting five separate email accounts, demand her constant attention.

“There’s always someone I need to speak with, or papers to read or prepare for board meetings,” Hayes says, reluctantly acknowledging that she never fully switches off work.

“I’ve got a freeloading pair of sneakers that travel with me everywhere but hardly ever see the light of day.”

It would be hard to find a more revered figure in the Australian agriculture industry than Hayes.

The central Australian cattle producer, a mother of four sons, is a trailblazer and one of the industry’s most influential figures. And she is passionate about encouraging the next generation to follow in her footsteps.

“Ag is a really exciting industry,” she enthuses. “It is highly sophisticated, fast paced, and it is a critically important industry. Ag offers so many options for young people wanting to build an exciting career.”

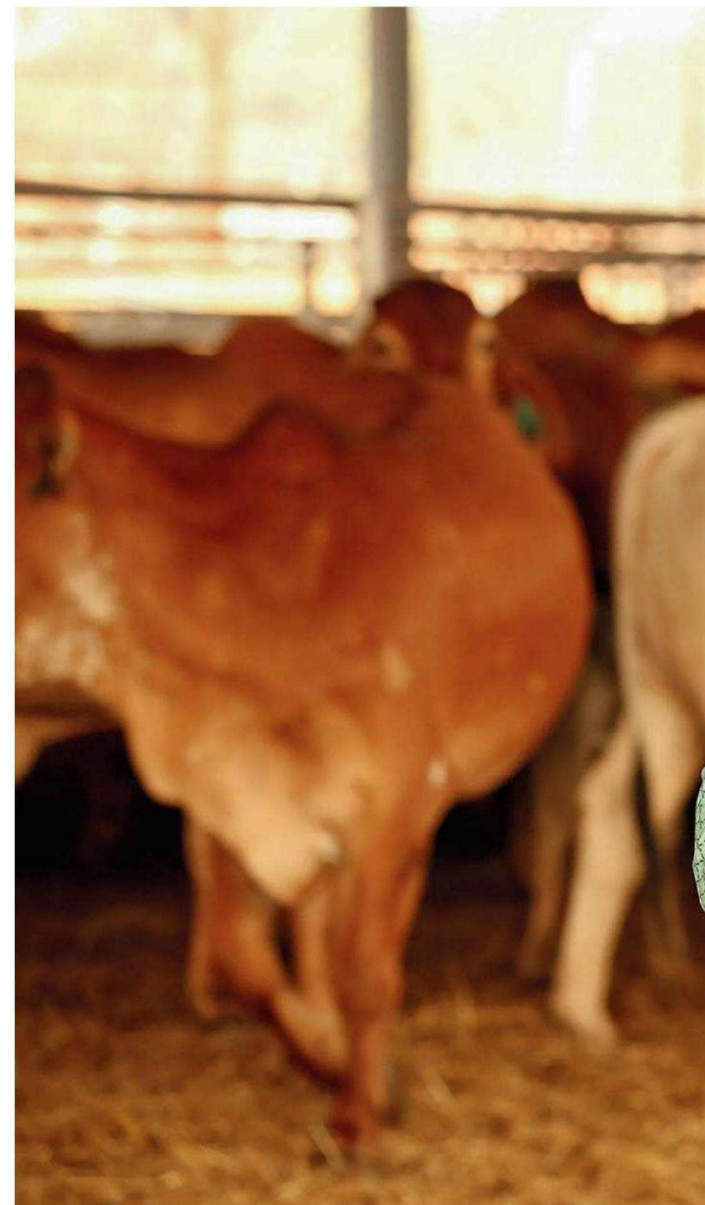
Although she’s had a long career at the coalface of farming, notably raised on and later running vast outback cattle operations, Hayes came to national prominence in 2014 when she was appointed chief executive of the Northern Territory Cattleman’s Association, the first woman to lead the billion-dollar pastoral industry. She’d smashed arguably the thickest of glass ceilings.

“For me it was a question of being judged on capability, not category, I knew that I was in that position because I was the right person for the role at the right time, not because I was female,” she says.

HAYES, who grew up on Allendale Station, 848km north of Adelaide near Oodnadatta, developed a deep love and respect for agriculture from an early age. Her parents, Ron and Jill, managed Poll Herefords at the vast and remote property, and she says those formative years at Allendale, where she was educated by the School of the Air and for a time attended the local Oodnadatta Aboriginal School, had a profound influence on her life.

“It was a harsh but very nurturing environment. I had enormous respect for the cattle managers. They were making business decisions on the run, often on the back of a horse, and I recognised that you needed to be more than just a good stock person to run these highly sophisticated but often-complicated businesses,” she says.

“I was always drawn to the mix of innovation and tradition, part of our industry is deeply rooted in tradition, which as a human is very grounding and important to the families we raise. But we operate in an innovative and exciting environment, and I love the mix of the two dynamics.”



Hayes was the only girl in her family, but didn’t see herself as any different to her brothers, or the largely male crew working in the harsh South Australian outback.

“I learned at Allendale that I could earn my stripes just as anyone else had done, especially among the blokes we worked with day to day,” she says. “But when I started out in my own career, I was often the only woman in the room.”

Among a long list of career achievements, she is noted for facilitating the industry’s successful class action against the federal government’s live export ban in 2011, and in 2016 she was named the Northern Territory’s Most Powerful Person.

Today, she is a non-executive director of AAM Investment Group, which specialises in large-scale agricultural investments, chair of the Royal Flying Doctor Service, chair of the northern Australia Infrastructure Facility – the federal government’s \$7 billion investment authority – while still operating Alice Equipment Hire, a civil plant and equipment business in the Northern Territory.

On any given week, her working world stretches from a home base in the Adelaide Hills to a business in Alice Springs, board and corporate work in Darwin or overseas. She can go from being in the paddock one day to washing down haulage equipment, commanding a board meeting, or



Tracey Hayes speaking at The Australian Global Food Forum in Brisbane in 2024, above, and with her four sons Luke, William, Sam and Tom.

meeting with US Congress the next. “I know how incredibly capable the women in our industry are, I’ve seen that evolve over time and nothing gives me greater pleasure than seeing young women – and young men – achieving in this industry,” she says.

DESPITE building a stellar international career in economics and funds management prior to coming home, fifth-generation pastoralist Falkiner says there were days, when she first returned to Haddon Rig, that she was too intimidated to speak up at meetings because she was the only girl in the room.

“Often, I’d be in an irrigation meeting with 10 men, which could be intimidating and it took me a while to gain the confidence and realise that. They were all actually really supportive and didn’t expect me to know all the answers or have the experience they did. The industry has come a long way but we still have a way to go,” she says.

Life on Haddon Rig is a world away from the skyscrapers of Melbourne, Sydney and the Netherlands where she cut her corporate teeth, and she couldn’t be happier.

“Every day is so different and that’s the joy of it. It can involve selling cotton or trading wheat, processing cattle or

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TRACEY HAYES

classing sheep, meeting with agronomists or designing feed rations with livestock nutritionists. No two days are ever the same.”

Like Hayes, Falkiner knew from an early age that she wanted to follow in the footsteps of her parents, George and Sally, who ran Haddon Rig for four decades.

“I went away to boarding school but I came back at every opportunity I could and I loved joining in, spending school holidays out in the paddock on motorbikes with the jackaroos and jillaroos, or sleeves rolled up marking lambs,” Falkiner says.

“It was a great childhood. My absolute favourite memory is being on my horse on the stock route with our drover, Russell Bradford, after school or during the school holidays, putting the cattle into breakers as the sun went down. It was an amazing way to grow up.”

After time away Falkiner decided it was time to head home at the start of 2023. She worked under her dad for two years before becoming manager, now running the property with her husband, Will.

“When I first came back, Dad said ‘your job is cashflow

CONTINUED PAGE 17

Liv Falkiner from Haddon
Rig Merino stud at
Warren in NSW.

FROM PAGE 15

and people' and within a month we'd had a livestock market crash and started a 12-month drought cycle. It became very clear that's exactly what my job was, cashflow and people. A place in the outback like this is so volatile, the seasons and markets change so quickly. It was a steep learning curve."

TODAY, Falkiner oversees a vast portfolio of enterprises under the Haddon Rig name, including dryland farming, cotton, cattle and the premium Merino stud on which the Haddon Rig reputation has been built over the past century.

"There's never a lull," Falkiner says. "We roll straight out of harvest in November into general shearing, then our artificial-insemination program in December, then we irrigate through summer. By March we hit the stud season again and by April we are sowing wheat and picking cotton."

Among an arm's length list of projects she's undertaking to drive innovation, maximise yield and future-proof the business is a recent partnership forged with fashion label Country Road to plant trees and protect waterways and surrounding marsh land, and Haddon Rig is currently hosting a university study of acoustic sound monitoring to learn more about the birds and wildlife on the farm.

"Everything we do is with a reduced footprint in mind, the less water and fertiliser we can use the better it is for the business and for the environment. We are working through drought mitigation, extending our containment yards, developing pontoon irrigation for our cotton to save labour, trialling different cotton varieties so we can maximise yield, and continuing to develop our Merino stud, with a focus on data and ease-of-care and the start of a new non-mules family this year."

However, Falkiner admits that sometimes, no amount of learning can prepare you for the challenges life on the land tosses up.

"No textbook can teach you what you learn from running the business day to day, and the challenges you'll face, feral pigs are the perfect example of how many profit centres a pest can hit at once; we had pigs eating the chickpeas as they came up, they ate the lambs as they were born and they were in the cotton as the picker was moving through the rows. In April last year, I resolved that there was nothing that the pigs weren't impacting and we are now building an exclusion fence right around the farm to try and mitigate the problem."

LISA Sharp, chief executive of Stockyard Beef, quips that she comes from a "long line of accountants".

"I was a city kid through and through and if you'd asked me 30 years ago if I'd be living my best life heading up a family-owned beef production business, I'd have said you were crazy," she says.

Although she didn't grow up with the soil between her



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LIV FALKINER

toes, Sharp has found her home in agriculture, becoming the first non-family chief executive of Australia's most-awarded beef brand, supporting a staff of 70 managing around 25,000 cattle, breeding properties and feedlot operations throughout Queensland and northern NSW.

"I just love my job and a typical week would see me meeting with the executive team looking at our business performance, our pastoral numbers, our animal health, processing numbers and sales and what's ahead of us as a team. But the days I spend out and about, particularly at our breeding operations, make my heart beat a little faster, it's extraordinary to see the herd we are building. I love showing our international customers our lot feeding, and sharing our story."

Stockyard Beef, which produces premium grain-fed Wagyu and Angus, has a deep family history, founded in 1958

CONTINUED PAGE 19



The Stockyard Beef team in Queensland. Stockyard runs and feeds about 25,000 cattle. Chief executive Lisa Sharp, right.



FROM PAGE 17

by Robin and Del Hart, who are regarded as feedlot pioneers in Queensland.

In 1973, they established Stockyard Meat Packers and commenced exporting chilled grain-fed beef to Japan, earning a place in the history books of Australian agriculture.

In 2024, Sharp took over from Robin and Del's son, Lachie, who had been a long-serving CEO but wanted to recast from a 'family business', to being a 'business family'. He became non-executive chair, with a separate family board sitting beside the company's executive governance board. "I'm trained in accounting and economics and I'd never dreamt of a career in ag, but it has been the most rewarding journey of my lifetime. It is a rich, dynamic and exciting industry," Sharp says.

"The transition from Lachie to me, as a non-family member, has been smooth because we share the same values. We have frank and fearless discussions and we are really good at asking ourselves if our conversations are for the board or executive table, or for the Hart family table, and separating them. It's a great privilege to be here because Stockyard is an extraordinary business which comes from a lifetime's work of the Hart family."

TAKING on such a strong family brand and established family business would be a daunting prospect for many, but Sharp had built a global career in marketing in consumer-led business, working with local and global FMCG brands like Uncle Toby's and Coca-Cola. When Coca-Cola purchased SPC Armonda, Lisa was exposed to Australia's primary producers, which led to a role heading up global

Today, Stockyard Beef is a must-have on the menus of the world's top restaurants, and while she constantly navigates market headwinds and the ever-present challenges of biosecurity risks, climate variability and trade barriers, Sharp says the tailwinds make it worthwhile.

WHILE women's participation in agricultural careers is improving, according to data from the Workplace Gender Equality Agency, only 19 per cent of industry board positions are held by women, and just 2 per cent of CEO or equivalent roles. AWIA president Cains says there's no shortage of capable women ready to contribute.

"What's been missing is visibility, pathways and in some cases, a willingness to look beyond traditional networks. Programs like Women on Ag Boards are helping to build confidence and capability, but we also

need continued focus from industry to open the door wider and recognise the depth of talent that's already there."

It's a message supported by Falkiner, Sharp and Hayes.

"I love seeing young women out there, leaning into the industry and having a go, and I'd love to see more women around the board table," says Hayes. "The sky is the limit with ag, and for young people wanting to make a global impact, Australian ag is hard to beat."

'I'm trained in accounting and economics and I'd never dreamt of a career in ag, but it has been the most rewarding journey of my lifetime, it is a rich, dynamic and exciting industry'

LISA SHARP

marketing and insights for industry body Meat and Livestock Australia.

"There was an incredible sense of purpose with MLA, I'd never felt anything like it. To play a small part in an industry of national importance was very humbling. What drew me to ag was the incredible variety of the roles and the people, their resourcefulness, creativity and passion for what they do. I've never seen that in any other sector."