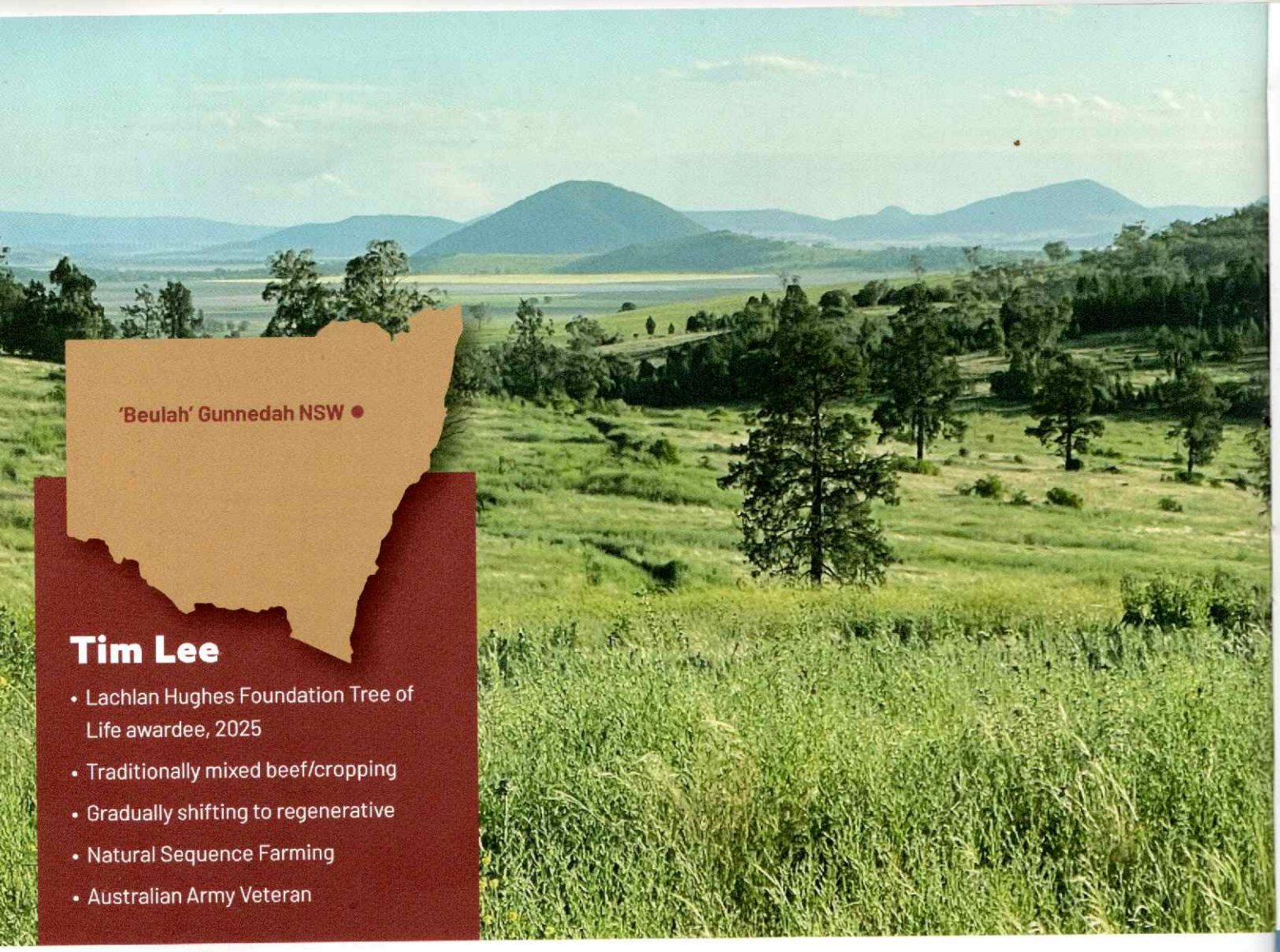


Tim Lee

- Lachlan Hughes Foundation Tree of Life awardee, 2025
- Traditionally mixed beef/cropping
- Gradually shifting to regenerative
- Natural Sequence Farming
- Australian Army Veteran

Regeneration on the Liverpool Plains

By Melissa Pouliot

As you drive across the NSW Liverpool Plains with the sun setting against the far-reaching horizon, a patchwork of dark chocolate soils and the varying shades of sorghum, corn, sunflowers, wheat, canola and cotton, you truly feel you have landed in farming paradise.

The symmetry of chemically-fallowed paddocks as flat as a billiard table, ready for planting the next winter or summer crop, trigger a sense of satisfaction and order.

Charles Massey writes about driving across the Liverpool Plains in his book, *The Reed Warbler (2021)*, noticing water lying still across the top of the paddocks after just 10 millimetres of rain.

Gunnedah district farmer Tim Lee has experienced this degradation of the rich Liverpool Plains soils on his family property, 'Beulah', settled by his great grandparents in 1915.

With a long history of sheep, cattle and cultivation, the now smaller holding of 485 hectares was not where Tim saw his future after finishing boarding school in Brisbane.

But it's where he's ended up and after decades of twists and turns, he's discovered he's exactly where he wants to be.

Homecoming

Following a 13-year career in the Australian Army with deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, Tim came home to help manage the farm with his parents, Peter and Judy in 2014.

In 2017 Tim's brothers, Ben and Jock, returned to the area to run a commercial business the three brothers purchased together in Gunnedah. Peter and Judy retired into town, leaving Tim to take on full management of the farm.

Following his family's footsteps, he continued their traditional industrial system. They grazed cattle on gently undulating hills of red chocolatey basalts with alluvial flats and grew winter and summer crops on their black, dark, self-cracking clays.

Their cropping program included wheat, barley, oats, chickpeas and summer crops of sorghum or dryland cotton.

When the rain stops

Tim says the land in this prime farming region makes an average farmer look okay, as long as it keeps raining. When the rain stops, it exposes the flaws in the high-input system the land has been under. This was particularly stark during one of the region's record-breaking and most brutal droughts from 2017-2020, and in 2020 he was forced to completely destock.

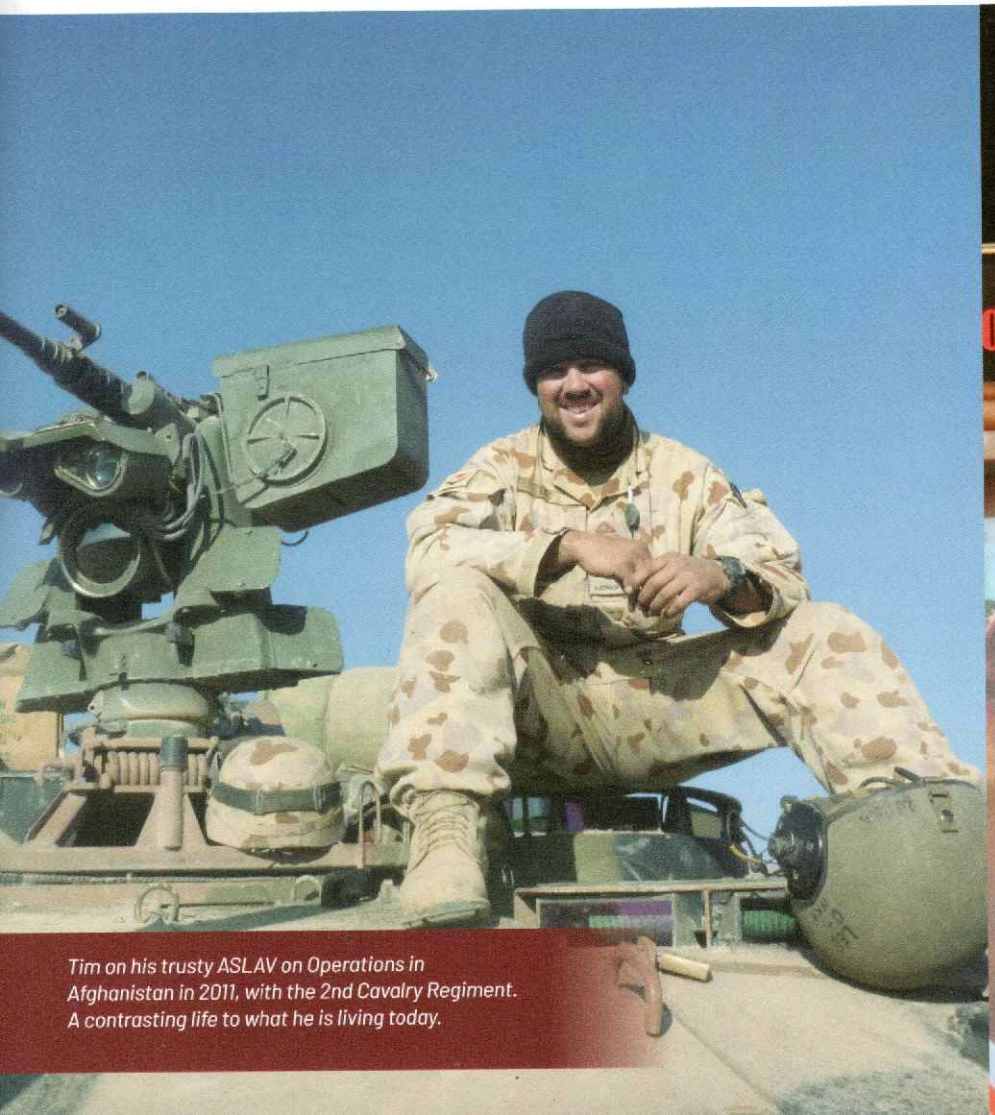
"Dad remembers in the 80s where they'd have beautiful gentle showers come over all the time, and it made farming easy. But as soon as that tap turns off we're in trouble and the rainfall we get now is more extreme and less reliable."

Working long hours in the tractor spraying cropping paddocks with chemicals to make them 'look clean', pulling spray nozzles off with his bare hands to blow obstructions out and clear the line, Tim didn't ask the questions he's asking now.

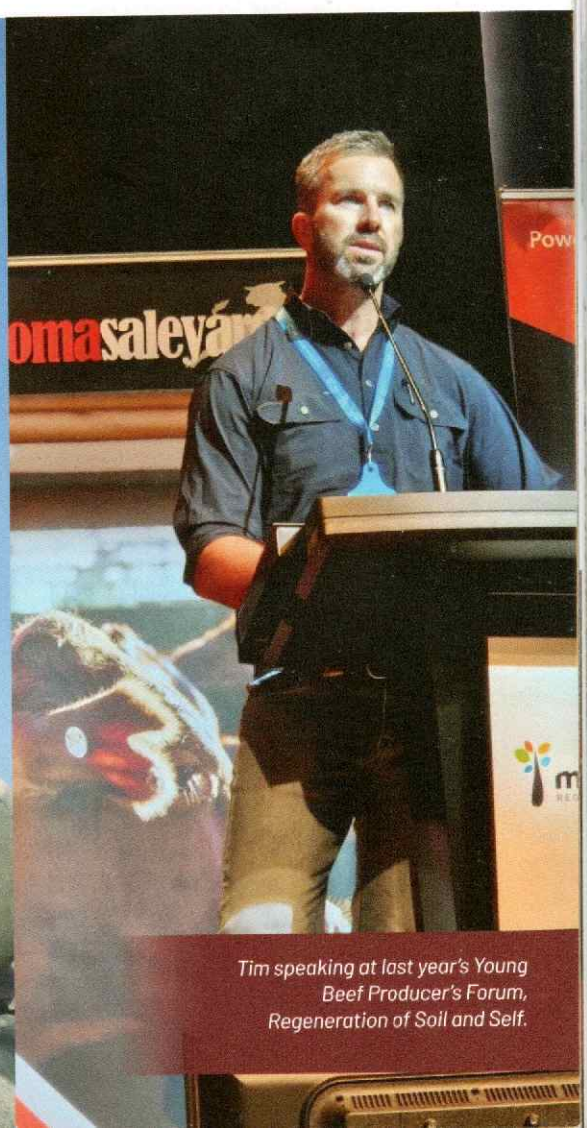
"I never wore gloves, I never wore a breathing apparatus or anything. Just before I changed over to regen, I remember getting a bleeding nose and massive headaches from spraying paraquat.

"There's a saying, 'you are what you eat ate', so if we're spraying chemicals all over our wheat and grain that goes through the feedlots and into our cattle and animals and then we're eating them, we're getting those forever chemicals in our body.

"But all my life until then, I never even thought about it."



Tim on his trusty ASLAV on Operations in Afghanistan in 2011, with the 2nd Cavalry Regiment. A contrasting life to what he is living today.



Tim speaking at last year's Young Beef Producer's Forum, Regeneration of Soil and Self.

Rock bottom

The unseen mental scars of war he hid from everyone, including himself, eventually caught up. The way he was farming exacerbated his struggles.

"I was in a machine so much and I'd get home at dark, drink 12 beers a night, which was just crazy, then get up the next day exhausted and get back in a machine and spray out a few more chemicals.

"I was heavily self-medicating for a lot of years and I wasn't telling anyone what was really going on. Alcohol was a big part of that; it is so readily accepted. Everyone I hung around with got on the beers pretty hard, that's just what we did."

In 2023, unable to continue, Tim made a dramatic move.

He leased out the cultivation side of the farm and bought a plane ticket to South America to study plant medicine. It was here he discovered regenerative agriculture, describing it as a 'massive breakthrough moment'.

Reducing his reliance on alcohol was a big step forward and with a fresh perspective he was able to start asking the hard questions.

"If I'm making the choice not to put all these chemicals in my body, what about the land I'm on?"

He started asking, why are we trying to destroy plants? Nobody could give him a satisfactory answer. It's just the way we do it.

"I was like, what am I doing? I need to change all this, try and turn things around and make this place a bit better.

"Once I started doing my own research it didn't take long to see my soil as a living organism rather than a commodity that I can pull a crop out of."

Challenges of change

Back on home soil, the next challenge was to implement change in an area where regenerative agriculture is far from commonplace.

It's not discussed openly at the local footy club and with multiple large corporate farms, the focus is on getting maximum production and maximum dollars.

"It's still kind of woo-woo to talk about. I think it's got a lot to do with the high production we get here on the Liverpool Plains. People don't question ways of doing things if it's working for them."

The hardest person to have a regenerative conversation with was his Dad.

"I was learning all these new ways of doing things and trying to bring them in on the farm. People thought I was crazy, especially Dad. He was just so indoctrinated into spraying, tilling – killing plants basically.

"He couldn't see a different way of doing things when in his 40-year farming history, it had worked how he did it, which I fully understand.

"I remember a conversation with him in 2023 where I said, 'I don't think we can work together'. That discussion was really hard."

He says the regen crowd has allowed him to be more vulnerable and open, and was more willing to share.

"I can remember as a kid some of the older farmers wouldn't tell you how they achieved X amount of tonnage. It was all a big secret and there was no sharing of information to try and help other people out.

"It's been amazing since getting more involved in regen to realise I'm not going to get shut down or criticised for doing something different. Everyone I've met has an open mind.

"With the regen community, people genuinely want to see you do better."

New direction

Last year, with the cultivation country still under lease, Tim secured a 25-hectare block for a trial cover crop. Adopting cell grazing with long rest periods allowed the backgrounding of 100 steers.

"We used to background steers on just oats and they did well off it, but it's not as good as having 15-16 different species with multiple grasses, legumes, pulses and forage brassicas.

"The cattle are doing a lot better on more variety, more biodiversity in the plants. It's better for their guts, better for the soil. It's hard to find any negative in doing things this way."

In just 12 months he can see significant improvements in the landscape from the high animal impact and long rest periods such as a shift in his plant succession to more desirable pastures.

His goal is to change from a mixed farming system to 100% grass-fed beef. But it's going to take patience and time to get there.

"It's a long road with regen and it takes time because you're letting the soil do its own thing. I've allowed for a three to five year window to really get up and running.

"I've taken on board what I've learnt, that if you go 'all in year one', it's going to be hard to budget for the next year.

"It's a gradual process."

Leasing his country out really helped, and he has now taken back most of the cultivation country and put in mixed species cover crops. This year he still has 120 hectares of his flat, black, cracking clays leased out.

"I'm transferring little areas over at a time so I still have an alternate income, whether it be off farm or that lease country coming in. If I went 'all in' straight away, the cash flow would be hard for a couple of years."

Soil intelligence

Tim's research led him to Natural Sequence Farming in 2024 and the Lachlan Hughes Foundation in 2025.

His regenerative project for the foundation was to install four kilometres of level NSF contours.

"The army taught me to do hard things. Regenerative agriculture has taught me to slow down, observe, and understand that everything is connected." ***A Place To Call Home Podcast, Episode 73***

"Initially, I could have gone a bit harder with the contours but I thought it best to start small. On the back of the incredible results, I'm converting the rest of the property, both the grazing and farming blocks."

Tim says the hardest part has been looking at a paddock and realising he doesn't have to go in and spray whatever weeds/plants that are growing.

"I just need to get out of the way and the land can repair itself with the plants that come up."

He no longer sprays chemicals or applies synthetic fertilisers, instantly freeing up more of his time that used to be spent in a tractor or spray rig.

After direct drilling a multi-species cover crop, he sits back to watch whatever plants or weeds that want to come up.

"The soil has an intelligence and it's punching up what it needs to. If it puts up big saffron thistles they're pulling up nutrients and minerals from further down that the grasses can't reach, so I just let them go through their process.

"One of the hard things is putting the blinkers on and understanding you don't have to go out and dig everything up or spray, you can just let it go through its natural process."

Lining up

His changes have made farming 100 per cent more enjoyable, and getting out of farm machinery and back into his paddocks has done wonders for his mental health.

"I like going down the paddock now and walking around to see what's going on. It's given me a different perspective and encouraged me to really observe my landscape. When it rains, I'm out in it to see where the water flows and where everything goes."

He says it has been a paradigm shift away from pure production to having more of an understanding of the environment, through being curious about how everything 'natural' works.

"Me getting out of the way is allowing all these things to happen and just line up for me."

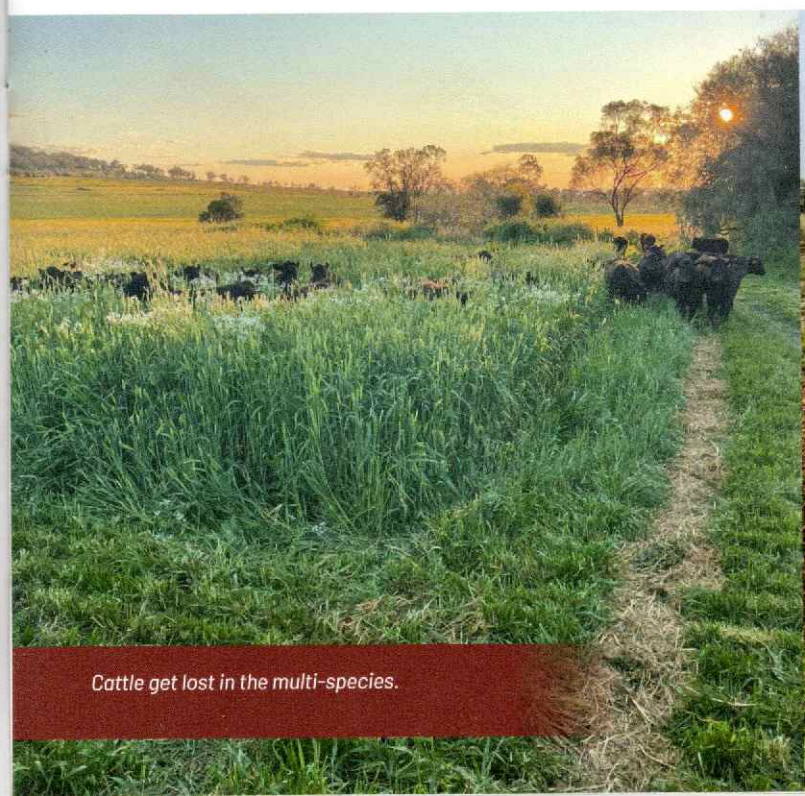
Tim says the more people he meets with a regenerative mindset, the more confident he becomes to keep looking forward.

"I've got a real mindset of looking forward, not back. Rather than dwelling on the past or the bad stuff that happened, I'm like, who cares? That's done, mate. We're looking this way."

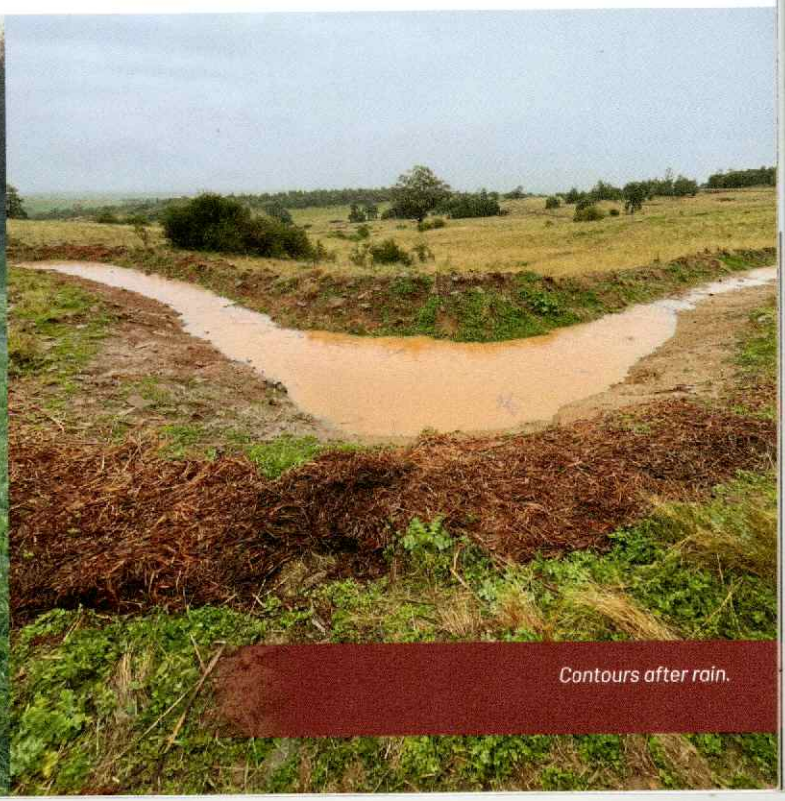
Seeing the changes in his country has also been a big motivator.

"I really want to have a standout regen ag showpiece property in the next 20 years. I can't change the world, but I can change my own little patch. I don't think I need to reinvent the wheel or do anything crazy. It's about having that inner happiness with what I'm doing.

"I'm planting trees I'm never going to sit under, but it brings me great peace knowing the work I'm doing now will be there for the next generations to enjoy."



Cattle get lost in the multi-species.



Contours after rain.