Use of neighbourhood groups for developing technology

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A change in approach to discussion groups has been successful in central Queensland. 'Socio–geographic' or 'neighbourhood' groups have been employed to assist farmers through 'participative' Yarning, to develop relevant technology in the topics of irrigation management and reduced tillage practices (1). Traditional discussion groups have concentrated on improving communication, but have stopped short of developing new technology. The farmers involved in these central Queensland groups were already motivated to improve their farm practices; they only lacked the technology.

Methods

Four groups were formed in the Emerald Irrigation Area to look at irrigation management and four groups were formed in the Dawson Valley to look at reduced tillage practices. With each group, a trial *was* established to focus attention on the topic and to allow experimentation. Management of these trials was a group effort, although most of the work on the trials was undertaken by Extension agronomists. This was important to ensure that the trials were correctly run. Group discussions were held whenever interesting results were apparent or when major decisions were required.

Discussion

The group approach worked particularly well because farmers had a say in the treatments applied. Farmers were involved in the exercise from the outset, and they were informed of progress throughout the season. This approach of 'participative learning' was also rewarding to the Extension Agronomist because in each case, he could be sure he was dealing with issues of concern to the farmer. From our experience with groups, a number of observations were made:

• Groups need not include the same participants on each occasion. Provided attendance at group meetings is not too small (3 or fewer) or too large (12 or more), participants should feel free to come and go as they please.

• The Extension Agronomist may have to continue to organize group activities and should be prepared to do this.

• The groups must work on problems important to them, not problems important to agronomists.

• Considerable effort must be put into the field demonstration.

• Meet only when you have something to see, or when decisions must be made.

• While the Extension Agronomist must be technically competent, he need not have all of the answers.

• Ideas from within the group must be carefully listened to. Most farmers have a very good practical farming knowledge; they just need guidance in technology.

• Discussion plays an important part in group activities. Reinforcement of ideas from within the group ensures the success of this extension approach.

• Although progress may be initially slower than the Extension Agronomist desires, the lessons learnt are better understood and more convincing.

• This 'participative learning' process, using farmer groups, accelerated the development of new, locally adapted technology and enhanced the rate of adoption of this new technology.

1. Daniels, J.D., 1985. Proc. 4th Aust. Soil Con. Conf., Maroochydore.