

FARMER DISCUSSION GROUPS - PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

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Summary. Groups of farmers coming together for the purpose of learning have a long history in at least some sectors of Australia's farming industries. In the last ten years the majority of farmers have become involved with one or more groups to address Landcare, productivity and farm business management issues. However, the information acquired through participation in groups still needs to be adapted and interpreted to meet the specific needs of individual farmers, and this usually requires consultant and adviser input. In future, groups will be more tightly focussed, and will disband once they have achieved their specific aims: their priority will be achievement of specific outcomes of immediate relevance to practical farming.

INTRODUCTION

The last ten years has been a period of massive upheaval and change within the cropping industry. Wheat prices are now fully exposed to the vagaries of the market as a result of deregulation. The quest for greater productivity has increased the reliance on purchased crop protection products, and herbicides in particular. In addition, production techniques have changed dramatically to include a greater diversity of oilseed and grain legume crops in new crop sequences and rotations, and these new crops are increasingly grown under minimum and zero tillage regimes.

At the same time, producers have been urged by government to become more self-reliant, particularly in managing their exposure to the ever-present risk of drought. They are also expected to take an increasing interest in, and responsibility for, the management of their catchment. This requires that they address issues at a whole-catchment scale including the provision of wild-life corridors, the preservation of native woodlands, and effects of their cropping practices on land degradation and salinity.

This paper is based on our involvement in, and experiences with, Landcare groups (and in particular the Avon-Richardson Catchment Improvement Scheme), Farm Management 500 and Farm Vision 2000.

OUR EXPERIENCE WITH GROUPS

Avon-Richardson Catchment Improvement Scheme

As farmers, we have always enjoyed a strong affinity with the land and an appreciation of nature. Before the onset of the severe cost-price squeeze of the 1980s, we were making a relatively easy living from cropping without asking too many questions. However, it was inevitable that we began to ask questions:

Why do trees grow in the hotter months while grasses die?

Why are the roots of some crops undeveloped?

Why do we fallow?

Why can't we grow good crops all the time? (apart from drought)

In the early 1980s, a Lands Department officer (Dennis Martin), who was based at Charlton, alerted us to the threat posed to our crops and pastures by salinity. Out of this grew an acceptance of our responsibility for its management. This manifested itself initially through the formation of the Lake Buloke Landholders' Association in 1985. But Lake Buloke was on the receiving end of the catchment. It soon became apparent that we needed to shift our focus, and take on a whole catchment perspective, if we were to

address effectively the multitude of problems that we were just starting to recognise. These included salinity, rising water tables, run-off, flooding and soil degradation. The Avon-Richardson Catchment Improvement Scheme (ARCIS) was born out of this realisation.

ARCIS was organised into a series of cells and the Lake Buloke Landholders' Association became the Buloke cell of ARCIS in 1988. Initially it took on responsibility for the screening of crops to cope with rising water tables and salinity. In time, it became involved with the direct seeding of trees, and fencing for the preservation of woodlands. In the last few years, a number of the cells around Donald, Swanwater and Laen have taken on MEY-Check in order to learn more about cropping with the intention of maximising water use (and yields) in the catchment.

Our experience under the ARCIS umbrella has demonstrated that producers organised as groups have the capacity to achieve much more than is possible through their individual efforts. This is because we are able to learn far more effectively through sharing our collective experiences. But, more importantly, groups are able to capture the ear of government by demonstrating their commitment to change at a catchment level. In turn, this allows them to tap into sources of funding that would otherwise not be available to address local issues and problems.

Farm Management 500

Farm Management 500 (FM 500) is a string of about 40 discussion groups that extends from South Australia, through Victoria and into southern New South Wales. The groups are facilitated by a network of consultants, and the whole project is managed by Neil Clark who is based in Bendigo. The project is funded through the sponsorship of a number of agribusiness corporations, and contributions from Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation and the producers themselves.

The origin of these groups can be traced to Neil Clark's Farmfacts groups which sought to help farmers identify the potential for computers to contribute to the improved management of farms, and to provide farmers with the skills needed to harness the computational and recording capabilities of the computer for their advantage. Farm Management 500 built on this vision to develop further a farm business ethos amongst producers who were committed to achieving the highest levels of productivity while at the same time addressing their personal and family needs.

Farm Management 500 groups meet 4-6 times each year to discuss issues of local interest, and take part in district workshops and regional conferences which provide the opportunity to hear knowledgeable speakers address issues of common interest across regional and industry boundaries.

Farm Vision 2000

Farm Vision 2000 is a farmer initiated and led discussion group which meets monthly for a breakfast meeting in Donald, Victoria. The group began in the 1990 drought. At that time we called a drought meeting in Donald in which we invited representatives from banks, the Rural Finance Corporation, social welfare agencies and government departments to identify what could be done to help rural communities cope with the immediate problems. Our conclusion from this was that there was little that outside parties could do to help us and so we would need to become self-reliant in managing the effects of drought. Within twenty-four hours of coming to this realisation, we had identified a group of farmers who shared common goals. We obtained 100% positive responses to the invitation to join a discussion group. Administration procedures are based on our experience of service clubs, namely regular meeting attendance and an annual change-over of office bearers.

A specialist speaker addresses each breakfast meeting. Topics addressed include grain marketing, developments in spray application technology, wheat breeding, faba bean agronomy, salinity, contract harvesting, and zero till planting equipment.

Of course there is a danger that our discussion group activity will merely burden us with far more information than can be assimilated and used. This we recognised as a problem particularly in the area of agronomy. However, the main advantage of a discussion group is that it provides the opportunity for members to identify the important ideas, and further develop them as a group. To some extent this can be done by immediately questioning the speaker, but most importantly the implications for action can be drawn out through discussions between group members over an extended period.

IMPACT OF GROUP ACTIVITY ON FARM MANAGEMENT

At times farmers suffer from a feeling of professional isolation. They are most vulnerable to these feelings during periods of unprecedented change. This has been the case in the last ten to fifteen years. Our involvement with groups, has provided us individually with the support of others who share a belief that change, although uncomfortable and threatening at times, can also be a source of opportunity. We have focussed on the opportunities by seeking the involvement of outsiders who have knowledge and experience that might be valuable to us. We often go out of our way to talk to people who have information and knowledge that is not immediately relevant, but it is rare for their perspectives not to impact on the way we go about our farming. A few of us have been profoundly affected by our exposure to the other perspectives. One of our most successful members left farming to operate an engineering/manufacturing business. Another has recently acquired an interest in a grain processing plant.

However, it is our view that groups by themselves would not have been as successful without access to farm management consultants and agronomists, providing individually tailored advice, and assisting with the interpretation of our experiences. Agronomists, both independent and agribusiness employed, are frequently asked for their opinions on a wide variety of production issues. In fact, the simultaneous emergence of groups and the ready availability of agronomic advice have complemented each other in bringing about beneficial change. However, the real value of groups is that because of our involvement in them we are better able to tap into the expertise and support of large companies, government departments and other progressive farmers. As a result, we now enjoy access to a wide network of colleagues, many of whom qualify as friends. The strength derived through our interactions within these networks has given us the confidence to move forward, to test out and try new techniques, to learn, to move on.

THE FUTURE

Goals are important in maintaining cohesion and commitment amongst group members. It is important to recognise that groups meet for a purpose, and once that purpose is achieved, then the very success of the group in achieving its objectives may result in the group disbanding. For this reason group size is also relevant; individuals within groups larger than 12 can be lacking in commitment. In addition, there is a danger that a half-hearted commitment to many groups can be counterproductive. This is because there is a dilution of effort and a poor focus on objectives if individuals are involved with too many large groups at any one time.

In future, groups may form for purposes that are much more specific than has been the case to date - for example to achieve 20 kg/ha/mm in wheat production. Speakers will be invited to address how members might achieve this goal and group members will share their experiences along the way towards its achievement. Participation will be driven by the achievement of a particular goal: it will be outcome-oriented.

Groups will be increasingly initiated by producers themselves who will, in turn, seek out the person that they need to facilitate group activity. The facilitator could be a government employee, or an independent adviser or consultant contracted by the group to help it achieve its goal.

We expect that we will see group activity develop around emerging opportunities for increased productivity through prescription (precision) farming and aerial monitoring/video imaging of crops.

CONCLUSION

Over the last ten years groups have formed to foster learning amongst farmers, their advisers and participating researchers. However, farmers still need support in interpreting and adapting information to their specific needs and will continue to seek professional advice for this purpose - for example through independent and agribusiness advisers.

To date, the activities of groups have not always been clearly focussed and producer commitment has often been lacking because of this. In the future, we will see the emergence of groups with specific goals. The life of these groups will be short because they will disband once they have achieved their specific objective.

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