

Women 'TopCroppers' ~ a valuable part of the farm workforce

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ABSTRACT

It is a fact that almost 50 % of the members of farm businesses are women. Many farm women are an untapped resource wanting to become more involved with farm operations and management. The Landcare program has provided one avenue where farm women can address rural issues in groups. However I believe there are many districts where their involvement has been limited, and there is an urgent need to further develop women's skills in all aspects of farm operations and business. This paper outlines a practical example as to how extension programs can be adapted to meet the huge need for flexible training programs for farm women in Australia. The Yerong Creek Womens Cropping Group is giving one group of women the opportunity to develop skills in various fields of interest. The women only approach enables them to learn in a relaxed atmosphere with peers of similar skill level.

KEY WORDS

Women, Topcrop, crop monitoring, extension, education.

INTRODUCTION

Coming from a research background, and being a cynic about "touchy feely" extension methods and butchers paper sessions, I very nearly pulled this paper out of the conference. Do people really want to hear about this? Does it fit the theme of the conference? It's not the results of some in depth study, or even a survey. There is no "Material and method" section, no data, and no discussion of results in the traditional sense. However I sincerely believe that the resources of women on the farm are not being fully utilised in the daily running and management of Australian farms today. There is an urgent need to introduce specialised training for women to fully develop this resource, and this paper shows that with a bit of initiative and commitment we can meet their needs.

Farming is changing rapidly and becoming more and more complex. Selling wheat is no longer a matter of driving the old truck into the local silo and putting it in the pools. There are numerous options which can start in advance of the crop being planted, and finish at some stage after delivery. Margins are getting smaller and smaller so every additional skill helps. For any businesses to succeed all partners involved must have the same goal and a desire to achieve that goal. The business must have people with the skills to cover all aspects to efficiently run it. If you run an automotive repair workshop you employ people with specific skills such as mechanics and perhaps an office manager. You train apprentices and up-skill experienced staff as time goes by and operations change. Farmers are now accustomed to attending training workshops on issues as far ranging as herbicide resistance management to calculating farm gate grain prices. It is now time to train the often silent partners in the farm business and harness the diverse talents and abilities with which farm women are blessed.

DISCUSSION

In many farm situations in Australia women do not play a major role in the farm operations or management. They are frequently absent at agronomy extension functions such as farm walk groups and field days. I have found that the two major reasons why women don't attend local discussion groups are:

- They have under school age children and feel that the children will disrupt the group and are unwelcome; and

- They feel they aren't up to the skill levels of their partner and the group. Often they don't understand large parts of technical discussions and feel threatened by all the jargon. In these situations it is difficult to ask questions when they feel everyone else understands.

They feel that involvement at this level conflicts with the "roles" that others (and this may be significant others such as in-laws or other respected members of the community) perceive that they should fill.

Farm groups are focused more towards farm operators who have an assumed level of understanding and in recent years they have had great opportunities to learn and expand their knowledge base. What I believed was needed was a farm group targeted at those farm operators with a lower knowledge base but who had a keen interest to learn. After much thought (did I really want another job?) and communications with possible starters, I bit the bullet in June 1999 and initiated the Yerong Creek Womens Cropping Group (YCWCG) in southern NSW. The chief aim was to narrow the knowledge gap by providing a warm learning environment.

The group meets monthly for an informal two-hour meeting where kids are welcome. Some meetings are held around the kitchen table in the home of one of the group members, while the next may be in the paddock or at a trial site, strollers and all! I have discovered the women are very keen to become involved and they are very enthusiastic and committed. They aim to get the most out of every meeting and don't miss an opportunity to ask a question. After a year, they are finally out of the habit of leading each question with "This is probably a dumb question" and the group dynamics have developed so that they are starting to answer each other's questions. In a short period of time they have developed skills and learnt sufficient jargon to enable them to go home and communicate about cropping issues with their partners and other farmers.

When one partner in a business doesn't understand, they tend to be left out of any of the normal planning discussions and the day to day decision making process. With a small amount of training they can be included. They can even challenge some of the ideas presented which can be very healthy for a business – to look at the big picture - outside the square it operates in. It avoids the feeling women get of being marginalised from the farm business, and it inevitably adds to the success of the farm partnership.

There remains the issue of how the male "other half" accepts the fact that their partner is learning their trade. Some men feel threatened and discourage their partners from attending. Some are jealous, as they want to come along, while at the other extreme some are pushing them out the door to attend. There are also the snide references to the "knitters group" or "recipe swapping meetings" in the usual and expected Australian way. However, I believe we are slowly growing through these issues to now have the support of many male colleagues.

The type and level of current and planned involvement in the farm business varies between participants, from those actively managing the office and assisting where possible with operations, to those who have limited input into or are new to the family business. However all have a keen interest in gaining a better understanding of overall farm business operations and partaking in business discussions. Some of the key interest areas are:

- Marketing – an ever increasing part of running a farm in the 21st century. Active marketing, being predominantly office based, is something that can be effectively done by a mother.
- Crop monitoring – understanding the phases of crop growth, inspecting for weeds and insects
- Weed management including herbicide resistance
- Medium term planning – looking at the bigger picture

Not surprisingly, these areas of interest are very similar to those of many of our traditional farmer groups. However, it is essential that the temptation to combine functions of these groups is not pursued, as the variation in skill level is too great for either group to benefit.

I have been fortunate enough to meet a number of very inspiring women who are actively involved in farm business. Invariably they have some level of tertiary training in agriculture, although not always. Their businesses are often managed better and are more progressive because of this extra skilled person in the business. Decisions can be challenged, and the work load can be shared according to skill and

interest level of each partner. These women understand and share the stress and emotional trauma that farmers frequently face due to floods, drought, market disappointments and the never-ending burden of loans and overdrafts. Sharing these stresses may also have benefits for the personal relationships within the whole farm family.

One place where women tend to have natural ability is in crop monitoring. Farmers are often too busy to give sufficient attention to the formal parts of crop checking, like recording plant counts, checking growth stages or digging legume roots to score nodules. However crop monitoring jells well with many farm women as it fits in well with child rearing and broken days between school buses. Also women often have a closer eye for detail and more patience, which is essential when checking for tiny red legged earth mite, filling out forms or sticking to mundane tasks. Women who become more involved with the cropping program through crop checking often become good agronomists and grain marketers too, and are able to routinely maintain good paddock records. They can then start to constructively question current management decisions for the good of the whole business.

CONCLUSION

The YCWCG has now developed into one of the most demanding and rewarding farm groups I am currently involved with. They meet once a month, 11 months of the year, rather than just during winter for the crop check program. With a little education and encouragement, they have quickly become proficient TopCroppers, and a shining example to their male counterparts. They fill out the forms correctly, and even return them on time. Husbands encourage their wives to attend, and are themselves invited to some of the group sessions, most jumping at the opportunity. They are also venturing and contributing to other meetings in the district, such as the local silo committee meeting.

I encourage farm women and agronomists to consider initiating women's cropping groups in order to encourage involvement and develop the skill of the farm women, such an important and integral part of the family farm business.