

Developing a state extension program - *TOPCROP* in Victoria

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ABSTRACT

The future of TOPCROP, a Natural Resources and Environment (NRE) grains crop monitoring program needed assessing because there was concern it was not meeting changing stakeholder needs. Evaluation of the program resulted in a recommendation that TOPCROP be retained but remodelled. This was achieved by planning with stakeholders, implementing strategies to meet goals, reassessing after three years followed by further modifications to the program. Evaluation and planning tools used included focus groups, program logic and Bennett's hierarchy. Using this approach, TOPCROP in Victoria has developed into an extension program that combines flexibility, allowing clients to address local issues, with the structure to address industry issues and deliver research messages.

Key Words

Extension, communication, evaluation, TOPCROP.

INTRODUCTION

TOPCROP began in 1990 as Maximum Economic Yield Check (MEY-Check), a farmer group crop monitoring program for the state of Victoria. By 1995, groups and coordinators were questioning the usefulness of continuing to monitor for the sake of monitoring. The question arose - should TOPCROP continue and if so, in what form?

Evaluation and planning processes were used to build a structured but flexible grains extension program for Victoria over a five year period. The processes used and results from those five years are examined in this poster.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

As a starting point, interviews of key stakeholders combined with focus group discussions best suited our evaluation needs, skills and budget. Interviews were held with farmer participants, group coordinators, researchers, private consultants and agribusiness. A checklist was used to ensure certain topics were discussed, but interviews were not restricted to this checklist and were more like "conversations with a purpose" (1). Results from these interviews were used as the basis for focus group discussions.

During 1996, 17 interviews with key stakeholders and four focus group discussions (one TOPCROP coordinator group, one agribusiness group and two farmer groups) were held. During 1998/99, this process was repeated to assess progress of the program. Thirty seven interviews with key stakeholders and one focus group discussion with a TOPCROP coordinator group were held. Interview and discussion results formed the base for recommendations for changes.

Stakeholder planning meetings were held at the end of 1996 to decide on a Vision, Mission Statement, outcomes and priorities. Program Logic (2) and Bennett's Hierarchy (3) were the main tools used to plan strategies and milestones as well as to explore the possibilities for determining program impact.

RESULTS

The 1996 strategic assessment gave four options: no change; monitoring plus issues important to individual groups; terminate or rebuild TOPCROP. The final recommendation was to rebuild TOPCROP with more flexibility, less monitoring and as a major NRE medium for grains extension. The 1998/99

strategic assessment indicated, among other things, that monitoring and benchmark development should be a core activity.

The ultimate result of these assessments is a TOPCROP program which aims for informed decision making. Oversight is by a State Management Group (consisting of stakeholders), with implementation by State and Group Coordinators. Yearly review and planning meetings are held to ensure the program is working well, to make any necessary improvements and to plan the details of the program for the coming year. This approach ensures TOPCROP is on track, everyone feels ownership and knows what needs to be done and why.

Key operational components include:

- Ground rules and training for group coordinators.
- Each group holds a review and planning session once yearly.
- Most group meetings conclude with a reflection session.
- Group coordinators balance the technical, facilitative and social in-group activities.
- Group coordinators meet regularly to discuss operational, technical and facilitative issues.
- TOPACTIVE modules provide a selection of activities for groups to choose from.
- A yearly State Focus on an industry issue chosen by stakeholders. Groups choose to be involved, some treatments are set, plots are large and groups are involved in monitoring.
- An information network (still under development) for stakeholders.

DISCUSSION

TOPCROP began as a standard "teaching" program that also asked farmers to provide monitoring data for NRE to process and provide production benchmarks. The program had little flexibility and all groups participated in similar activities. The current TOPCROP program addresses local issues in a group learning environment where the experiences of individuals in the group are as important as expert information. The program now allows groups to choose the issues they wish to address. It also provides an opportunity for groups to explore state industry issues, share information and develop local benchmarks themselves.

Evaluation and planning were important tools, but the key factor in this change was the group coordinators. They added the skill of facilitation to their repertoires so they could facilitate farmer groups sharing information and ideas. Additionally, they took on an active role in the development of the TOPCROP program.

Achieving an appropriate extension program with structured flexibility is time consuming (four years in Victoria) and on-going. Farmers go through a similar process when adopting/adapting technology. Changing TOPCROP has given us insight into why technology uptake by farmers can be a slow process even with a good extension program.

CONCLUSION

Evaluation and planning should be integral to any extension program and these processes should involve the stakeholders. It is possible for a state extension program to be flexible, meeting the different and changing needs of stakeholders, while still having enough structure to provide a quality service to clients and good support for the extension service providers. Where change involves changing the knowledge, aspirations, skills and attitudes of people, the change process will be a lengthy one.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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