

Sisters are doing it for themselves

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Abstract

There is a growing trend in the farming world for women to become more involved in the family farm business. This involvement takes shape in many different forms, and has raised a need in the community for increased learning opportunities and social interaction to support the work of these women. Traditionally, farming men have been targeted to become involved in the wide array of groups and organisations formed to improve farming practices, but there is a growing need for a support network tailored to the needs of women.

A trip to the Southern region of Western Australia, was enough for the women involved in the Murrayville Landcare group in North Western Victoria, to see what could be achieved with a little agronomic understanding.

In 2001 the Murrayville Women's Landcare/Topcrop group was formed with an emphasis on learning basic agronomic principles and building a social environment between the women which had not existed previously. The group has quickly increased its member base from twelve at the conception, to over twenty members at the present time. This growth was achieved in a space of a year, which is testimony to the needs of isolated rural communities to use these types of groups as both a learning tool and as a social outlet.

The paper outlines how extension programs such as Topcrop can service groups like the Murrayville Women's group, and play a major part in transforming the traditional role of women in agriculture.

Key Words

Women, Agriculture, participation, Topcrop, enthusiasm

Introduction

One of the first questions I asked myself (and the group) when I began working for TOPCROP was, "Why are there so few women attending the farmer group meetings?" The common response was "they feel intimidated by the men, and will only be asking silly questions". This perception made it difficult to integrate the women in to the group, and although there were a few women attending the meeting, it was always the same faces. There was still an interest from women in the Murrayville area to participate, but not with the men. They wanted an environment where they felt comfortable saying anything and asking any "minor" question.

With so many women interested in learning more about the farm, and wanting to acquire new skills to benefit their own business, it was obvious something was needed to be done to facilitate the women in the Murrayville area. The challenge was how should the group be promoted? Should it be solely targeted at Women or should children be included as well and therefore be identified as a "Starter Topcrop Group"? Another challenge was to earmark the women who would help run the group and take ownership in keeping the motivation and ideas flowing, to ensure the group activities addressed all the needs of women living in rural communities.

Discussion

A trip by the Murrayville Landcare group to Western Australia was the catalyst, which prompted the women members to form a separate Murrayville Women's TOPCROP/Landcare group. The Western Australian trip was organised by the Landcare group to look at the Mallee farming systems in the west. It gave attendees an insight into the way women were involved and very much included in day to day farming activities, and that they were also major drivers in the local Topcrop group meetings. With the children heading to Perth for their schooling, the family farm was heavily dependent on the involvement of both partners to make the most out of their business.

The group meets about 4-5 times per year, with a planning session being held at the start of the season to identify the group's interest areas and the main issues to be tackled throughout the year. The meetings generally address agronomic and business issues (weed I.D, Nitrogen Management, Computer Banking, Succession planning etc), although they do have meetings focussing on personal development and social activities.

20/20 Vision is a concept Birchip Cropping Group have used to promote a future image of agriculture in the year 2020. To envisage an extension network throughout the central Mallee of Victoria in the year 2020, would see women highly active in group activities, utilising the training programs available for improving farming practices (eg. farmbis), and having a clear and defined role in the farm business. Does this need to be a twenty year vision or is it closer than we think? Women becoming involved in agriculture and the family farm is becoming "the norm" throughout country Australia, and this trend is likely to continue as the need grows for women to contribute within the farming business.

Cooking, ironing, and cleaning are not a part of the 2020 vision for women, but a valuable manager of a business who will be skilled in her particular role. Whether it is doing the accounts, herbicide and fertiliser regime, or rotation management, her role will be vital to the business. At present, too many farmers are relying on a one-man operation to run their business, and are not utilising their partner's skills and knowledge to help their business grow and become more profitable.

Businesses of all sectors are becoming more and more professional, through computer programs, strategic plans, projected annual returns etc, farmers need to start treating their business with the same proficiency to keep moving forward. What price do farmers put on their time? How important is training to a farmer? What are farmer's limitations to go the next step in technology, size and equipment? All these questions would receive a different response depending on a range of factors. However, to run a successful business in this economic climate requires personnel with training and the flexibility to deal with change, so it can progress into the future. It seems logical for women to take a lead role in the family farm.

Conclusion

The Murrayville Women's Topcrop/Landcare group is something that will not be around forever, by the next Agronomy Conference it will be in its final stages before disbanding. Why? Because the Murrayville Women's Topcrop group will be joining the Men's Topcrop group to create a single group. The women's group has given the Murrayville women the confidence to work alongside their partners and no longer feel self conscious at meetings. The women may want keep the group running as a social outlet, however there will only be one Topcrop group. The ideology behind this is, two heads are better than one, and working towards a common goal will surely help the group's longevity.

References

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