

Farmer Discussion Groups in Central and Southern NSW

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A reduction in funds available for NSW Agriculture district agronomists has led to pressure to change extension practices. The limited available resources has meant servicing groups rather than individual farmers is the only option now and in the future. NSW Agriculture were concerned that the technology to overcome the high pasture failure rate in the drier areas is available but is poorly adopted (Orchard, 1992).

Key farmers were nominated by the district agronomists, and were asked to choose a group of fellow farmers and invite them to the meeting. These key farmers were given guidelines to the size (8 to 15 people) and nature of group members.

Our role was to organise, design and facilitate these focus groups. A common format of non-directive questions was used to facilitate discussion within six broad areas. Questionnaires were also used to provide background information, and were filled out at the end of each meeting so as not to prejudice the discussion.

Seven farmers discussion groups were organised in Nyngan, Condobolin, Narrandera, Weethalle, West Wyalong, Jerilderie and Merriwagga. The six broad areas of discussion were: goals; limitations; pastures; information sources; NSW Agriculture; and the future of the group.

The issues derived from both the discussion and questionnaires, were sorted into two categories: (1) The common issues (any issue stated by more than four of the seven groups); and (2) issues specific to only a few of the groups.

Results

The following themes were common to most groups:

(1) Farmers goals are to:

- Increase productivity/improve the farm;
- make money/consolidate debt;
- maintain lifestyle; and

We were commissioned as an independent research team to initially determine the relevant issues of concern and initiate the idea that the groups continue.

Methods

The qualitative research technique applicable to focus groups (Stewart *et al.*, 1990) was used in the study.

- pasture establishment;
- weed control; and
- lucerne grazing management.

(4) Farmers acknowledged the value of pasture improvement. The low rate of adoption of pasture technology is due to:

- the economic climate (especially with regard to wool); and
- their cautious attitude that "nothing is as expensive as failure".

(5) Farmers in all the regions were content with the quality of service provided by their district agronomists, and acknowledged that funding limitations restricted the availability of:

- publications previously provided;
- staff, machinery and resources for trials; and
- time and resources to allow individual extension service.

(6) Farmers noted the important contribution localised information would make (especially in regard to establishment methods). It was felt that pasture research had been limited in the western region and that further trials were an appropriate way of addressing issues that genuinely concern farmers. Farmers were prepared for these trials to be farmer owned and monitored by NSW Agriculture.

(7) Farmers also recognised discussion groups (including those with pastures as a focus) as an effective means of distributing information.

- improve the sustainability of their farms.

(2) Common limitations were:

- the environment;
- the cost price squeeze (commodity prices);
- the Australian Government;
- labour and employment costs; overseas markets; and
- access to knowledge (technical and markets).

(3) It was evident that pasture management was an issue of concern. Farmers recognised that pastures are the key to successful farming and are a benefit in the cropping and livestock phases, although they were generally dissatisfied with their pastures. Limitations to pastures were:

- financing the pasture phase;

The project was useful in prioritising issues, initiating the idea that the groups continue and planning relevant pasture trials. There is an opportunity to create a collaborative learning environment for both farmers and agronomists.

The focus groups identified the complex and limiting environment in which farmers operate. The reduction in farm income has meant farmers are planning only for the short-term. In the face of the cost price squeeze, most farmers are inclined to minimise costs by reducing inputs and improvements. This has also affected the adoption of conservation methods.

The adoption of pasture technology has been limited by the lack of return from agricultural commodities, although pastures are now being prioritised by some farmers. We feel that the adoption of pasture technology will increase with the understanding of the long term benefits and greater confidence in establishment techniques. Any extension programs to do with pastures must however place emphasis on economic as well as agronomic aspects.

References

- Orchard, P. (1992) GRDC Project Application 1992/93. NSW Agriculture.
- Stewart, D. and P. Samdasani (1990) "Focus Groups - Theory and Practice", *Sage Publications*.
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