

Highlights from the Low Rainfall Collaboration Project

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GRDC funded: Low Rainfall Collaboration Project.

Background:

The initial low rainfall collaboration project (LRCP) commenced in 2003 with funding from GRDC to link the low rainfall farming systems groups more effectively and help them learn from each other.

GRDC supported a second round of funding from 2006, with a revised structure which had Geoff Thomas as Project Manager (50% FTE), Dr Nigel Wilhelm as Scientific Consultant for 75% of his time and additional expertise contracted as required. It supports five Farm Systems Groups/Projects – Eyre Peninsula, Mallee Sustainable Farming Inc, Central West Farming Systems, Upper North and BCG.

The project has just commenced a third round of funding (until 2012) with strong support from GRDC and the FS groups again.

It seemed timely to now provide a summary of what the project has been doing over these past few years and perhaps, even more importantly, where it is going into the future.

Maintain a Newsletter:

The project produces a newsletter 4-6 times a year to communicate new developments and current conditions to all the groups and to a long list of interested groups and complementary organisations. It serves not only as a useful means of sharing info but also in building esprit de corps.

As well as the newsletter a Calendar of LRCP and other important events is produced and has resulted not only in better communication but in avoiding clashes.

Conduct an Annual Workshop:

Workshops are organised in conjunction with one of the groups (Condobolin, Upper North and Birchip in the last 3 years). Each workshop is a mix of group reporting, field visits, technical sessions, group process sessions, informal discussions and having fun. These are a very useful vehicle in providing mutual support which is importance when things are tough.

Visits by Farmer Groups:

The LRCP supports groups of farmers visiting other project or regions for their mutual benefit. Guidelines have been established which require goal setting, planning and feedback/reporting.

Because of the seasons the demand in this area has dropped off and the program is now more targeted to younger farmers and attendance at specific events such as the Adviser Updates.

Sharing of Materials:

Wilhelm N. & Thomas G. 2010 – Highlights from the Low Rainfall Collaboration Project.

Mallee Sustainable Farming 2009 Research Compendium pp. 167 - 169

Also available at: <http://www.msfp.org.au/research.php?page=compendiums>

This has been a real area of growth in the project with many articles being prepared and published for the benefit of LR groups. For example, the LRCP produced the “GRDC 2008 Planning Guide for Low-Risk Farming” and the “2009 Planning Guide for Farmers with Limited Finances.”, which were printed and distributed widely in Ground Cover by GRDC.

Research and development support:

A major component of the LRCP is to provide research support to the groups. It does so in a number of ways:

- Bringing expertise together to address issues and provide direction such as in WUE, soil biology and crop nutrition.
- Identifying and meeting research needs including securing funding, eg.
 - Summer weed control using PA
 - Canola for low rainfall areas
 - Deep fertiliser placement
 - Lucerne establishment
 - Feeding summer lambs
 - Crop sequencing
 - Crop growth workshops
 - Profit/Risk workshops
 - Providing input into G&G review in preparation for phase II.
- Provision of expert statistical support in the planning and interpretation of projects.
- Involvement in setting R&D directions with research agencies and industry funding bodies eg (in soil biology, plant improvement, crop sequencing and NVT).
- Direct assistance to groups in planning and conduct of their program, especially Upper North and Eyre Peninsula.
- Providing advice and services in establishing research reviews and responding to government decisions (such as closure of Walpeup and Condobolin).
- Reviewing media releases for groups prior to their publication.

Farm systems and business management:

Given the difficult seasons in recent years, this has been one of the most challenging areas. It is also an area where most groups appreciate the need but lack capacity.

Several approaches have been taken including:

- Production of two Planning Guides (2008 and 2009) which provide a step by step approach to planning for the next season, with associated technical detail – 13,500 copies were distributed in 2008 and 24,000 copies in 2009. The 2009 guide was specifically for farmers with limited finance. These guides have proven very popular with farmers and with banks and have been used as the basis for regional planning workshops.

- Profitability/Risk Management Project with Ed Hunt, University of Melbourne and BCG.
- Decision Support Tool Evaluation - Masters Project by Bill Long with CSU and NSW DPI.
- Negotiation with GRDC to place greater emphasis on this area.
- Arrange a series of articles on risk management for Ground Cover in 2009.
- Forming a Farm Financial Expert Group.

Evaluation of the impact of FS groups:

This is still one of the most difficult areas with groups tending to concentrate on evaluating activities rather than project outcomes.

Nevertheless progress has been made in:

- Developing greater understanding amongst groups of the need for more rigorous evaluation.
- Farmer survey with Upper North Farm Systems which highlights how this approach can be used to understand where farmers are at and what programs they need.
- Leadership in assessing progress towards the GRDC (and G&G) goals of increasing WUE and Capacity Building using the three tier approach. This will provide an objective basis for evaluation of group activities based on the adoption of key practices and the impact on farm and regionally.
- The use of profitability/risk management factors in evaluating the impact and sustainability of projects and in determining future research and extension directions by the groups.

The future:

LRCP has now just entered its third cycle of funding with GRDC. While the structure and scope of LRCPIII is very similar to the previous phase, the current project is now taking a more pro-active approach to R,D&E support for the groups.

This approach has already seen positive outcomes in the form of three expressions of interest, developed and submitted by LRCP, being requested to produce full project specifications by GRDC (Crop sequencing, Crop growth workshops and Profit/Risk workshops). These projects will be conducted by the LR groups for their regions. The LRCP has also taken a major role in developing the direction for the WUE initiative funded by GRDC, and is responsible for constructing the initial benchmarking survey for this initiative in LR areas.

The biometrical support for groups will also be ramped up with increased budget for Chris Dyson's time for FS groups.

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