Getting it together: steps to sharing expert support

Dr. Nicole Dimos - Mallee Sustainable Farming Inc.

The issue
Many of the farming systems changes taking place across the Mallee require education, training and on-farm trial and error. Good examples include making the shift to no-till, stubble retention and precision agriculture.

Making use of expert advice for local situations can be an important component of adopting complex new technology. However, the use of specialist consultants is low in some areas of the Mallee.

In response to this, MSF developed a pilot program to help farmers in areas with a low usage of agricultural consultants to benefit from expert support. The pilot program involved developing Local Adoption Information Clusters (LAICs). LAICs link a small number of neighbouring farmers with a consultant to provide relevant expertise. The pilot model provided farm-specific specialist advisory support to encourage trialling and adoption of new farming practices.

What it means
The main aim of the LAICs is to bring together expert consultants with a local cluster of farmers who can co-trial, share resources, results, experiences and knowledge. This assists producers by providing information and advisory support at a localised level and reduces the cost of a consultant for individual farmers.

The benefits of LAICs
A number of benefits can be gained by forming a cluster group. These include:

• Overcoming the lack of local advisors and creating raised awareness of consultants available.
• Forming stronger links with friends and neighbours to share farming challenges.
• Creating opportunities to trial and share farm resources.
• Obtaining farm specific advice by avoiding larger range environmental differences.
• Motivation to improve sustainable farming practices.
• Opportunities to continue with on farm change and to build an ongoing relationship with the consultant.

The farmers involved in the pilot project praised the LAIC concept. Here are some examples.

“I’d been thinking about using a consultant, but being able to share the cost of him has made this decision easier and I get the info in time”

“MSF is a great banner in making this work”
“Being able to bounce off each other has made it easier for me to convert my (cultivation) bar”

“Being able to share my farm experiences in the paddock has helped me learn more about nutritional issues and between my neighbours we’ve now identified varieties that are susceptible and had it confirmed by an expert”

Establishing an LAIC
Each farm business is unique, allowing LAICs to be established in different ways with MSF available to help you through the process. Here are three possible starting points.

- Once you have identified the issues you want to address and found a suitable consultant, the next step is to choose the neighbours you want to form the cluster with. This choice is important so make sure you choose wisely by considering factors such as environment, farm enterprise, financial constraints and personality. In short, ensure your partners have aligned goals so a cooperative relationship can develop.
- Your current consultant may suggest that a “cluster” be developed rather than just individual consultancy as the most cost effective and beneficial way to advise you.
- You may have an issue to resolve or a change to make, but need assistance in forming a LAIC. Mallee Sustainable Farming Inc, with input from a selected consultant, can help in developing cluster groups and the selection of the most useful advisor(s).

Choosing a Consultant
Once you have formed your group and identified common priorities, the next step is to find an appropriate consultant or advisor. Considerations include enterprise type, envisaged changes and financial capacity. Opposite are listed some of the consultants who work in the tri-state Mallee region.

Crop agronomy
Agrilink Agricultural Consultant Pty Ltd
08 8843 4282
Agrivision
03 5032 3377
Allan Mayfield Consulting
08 8842 3230
CropFacts Pty Ltd
03 5586 6260
John Stuchbery and Associates
03 5497 1956

Crop agronomy and business management
Dodgshun Medlin
03 5032 9888
Rural Directions
08 8525 3000/ 08 8842 1103

Business and risk management
O’Callaghan Rural Management
03 5441 6176
Applied Economic Solutions Pty Ltd
08 83967122

Animal management
Productive Nutrition Pty Ltd
08 8344 8816

Aspects of farming systems
Rural Solutions SA
1300 364 322

For further general information please contact MSF on 03 5021 9100

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