

Value adding to the Agribusiness Trial Network in Western Australia

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Abstract

The Agribusiness Trial Network (ATN) began in 2005 as a pilot initiative of the Grain Research Development Corporation (GRDC) to promote validation of agronomic practises by local farmer groups. The aim of the trials network was also to enhance communication and extension activities between private agronomists, agribusiness and local groups. Due to the success of the initiative in Western Australia it was extended nationally in 2006. It has successfully motivated local farmer groups to continue with their work by formally engaging them with agribusiness and farm consultants to address local crop production issue chosen by the groups. A challenge for the scheme is timely capture of trial results and distribution of findings throughout the industry. Farmer group networks can play an important role in gaining broader value and impact from the projects.

Key Words

Local farmer groups, trial networks, validation, agronomy

Introduction

GRDC called for tenders from agribusiness and farmer groups to develop agronomic trials to resolve local issues in Western Australian farming systems as a pilot initiative in 2004. The aim was to enhance communication and extension activities between private agronomists, agribusiness and farmer groups and was know as the Agribusiness Trial Network (ATN). The initiative was to service a gap in support for local farmer groups who were often isolated from support of government agencies or larger grower group trial work (GDRC, 2004). Each project needed to address local issues of concern to the groups within the grain farming systems.. Agribusiness applicants were required to have a demonstrated track record of good communication and linkages to researchers and industry from the agribusiness applicants. Groups were also required to provide evidence of how they were going to communicate their work with other growers and farmer groups

The projects

According to Kearns (2006) over 23 proposals were received by GRDC in 2005 and almost double this number in WA for 2006. Five local farmer groups were successful in 2005 and an additional four groups obtained funds in 2006. The applicants extended from Northampton to Jerramungup and came from either agribusiness or farm consultants in partnership with a local farmer group. In 2005 the Local Farmer Group Network (LFGN) assisted four groups in their application for up to \$25,000 each and coordinated six groups with their applications in 2006. This paper outlines the success of the agribusiness trial network and highlights the value-adding role a formal network of grower groups can play in such an initiative.

Network role

LFGN played an important role in initially introducing local groups to the ATN opportunity and then helped facilitate partnerships between local farmer groups, farm advisers and agribusiness. The network distributed deadlines, templates and shared ideas to assist groups and their partners in their applications. LFGN also provided some assistance in developing proposals. Table 1 summarizes the successful

agribusiness partners who established a partnership with a local grower groups. Of the ten successful project proposals that were funded eight were members of the LFGN.

The Local Farmer Group Network used the *Newswire* to distribute trial lists from the successful member applicants and place them on the website. The network also generated local and Statewide press releases to promote the ATN field day activities and events. The exchange of trials lists and results between grower groups made more groups aware of other group's interests outside their region. Some isolated groups began to see that they were not the only ones dealing with particular problems. The exchange of results proved to be a challenging role for the network coordinator who actively pursued results from groups and their agribusiness partners at the end of 2005 (Carmody, 2006). It wasn't until May 2006 that all the member groups who had ATN trials were finally distributed.

Table 1 List of GRDC Agribusiness Trial Network Projects in Western Australia 2005 – 2006.

Farmer Group	Local issue/ Project*	Agribusiness Partner	Year
Ninghan Farm Focus Group	Seeding systems	Agri Tech Research	2005 + 2006
Jerdacuttup Top Crop and Pasture Group	Crop nutrition and late N on canola	David Eksteen United Farmers	2005
Moora-Miling Pasture Improvement Group	Disease and nutrient management	David Williams Agrow Consulting	2005
Kellerberrin Demonstration Group	Cereal Disease and Potash	Farm Focus Consultants	2005 + 2006
Yuna Farm Improvement Group & others	Liquid nutrient management and trace elements in cereals	Agrarian Management	2005 + 2006
Northern Agri Group	Strategic management issues	Planfarm	2006
Ravensthorpe Agricultural Initiative Network (RAIN)	Soil and crop health	Agri Tech Research	2006
North and South Tammin Farmer Groups	Trifluralin & droplet sizes	Synergy Consulting	2006
Facey Group	Decline in canola yields	Agri Tech Research and ConsultAg	2006
Casuarina-Walkaway Farm Improvement Group	Subsoil variable rate lime application	Silverfox Solutions	2006

* More detail of individual group activities can be found on the LGFN website; www.lfgn.org.au

LFGN was successful in getting neighbouring groups to visit each others ATN trials. Two examples of this were members of the Oldfield Group visited the Jerdacuttup Top Crop and Pasture Group and members of the Kellerberrin Demonstration Group visited the Ninghan Farm Focus Group for their spring field day.

Conclusion

As a pilot program, the Agribusiness Trial Network encouraged more coordinated activities between agribusiness and local farmer groups and is a welcome strategy from GRDC. It empowered local farmer groups to continue to develop and seek further partnerships for validation in their own district.

The extent of the impact of ATN projects will be determined by the ease with which participating groups and agribusiness share their ideas, proposals and results. Farmer group networks and their coordinators are in the best position to facilitate this exchange.

Feedback from participating groups was very positive and more groups would welcome the opportunity for access to professional help and sharing of knowledge with other groups in doing trials. The ATN has good potential to increase the adoption of new technology by a broader base of growers throughout the industry. It encourages smaller groups to form partnerships with agribusiness research professionals and/or agronomists to develop some independence and self reliance for their members. It increases opportunities for communication between local farmer groups and the coordinating role of the network. Local Farmer Group Network has an important role in adding value to the ATN initiative by acting as a conduit for exchange of trial ideas, plans, results and group tours between its members in the network.

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