



June, 2017: Newsletter Five:

## Stimulating private sector extension in Australian agriculture to increase returns from R&D

*Stimulating private sector extension in Australian agriculture to increase returns from R&D* (Enhancing Private Sector Roles in Ag Extension) is a three-year project to develop and test models to build the capacity of the commercial and private sector in delivering extension services to Australian farmers.



Australian Government  
Department of Agriculture  
and Water Resources

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### 2017 project annual forum

Private sector participation in agricultural extension and greater collaboration was the focus of the Stimulating private sector extension in Australian agriculture to increase returns from R&D forum last month.

The forum was held on 17 May in Melbourne.

Attendees included private consultants and service providers, agribusiness, farmers and farmer-owned organisations, research and industry organisations and government bodies.

The aims of the forum were:

- To engage private-sector representatives in a cross- sectoral discussion to explore how well agricultural extension is currently operating in the context of the whole RD&E system;
- To identify the critical issues that need to be addressed for extension to operate efficiently and effectively in the RD&E system;
- To identify the potential opportunities and potential strategic actions that could be taken to address
- the critical issues and improve the local on-ground or regional operation of extension functions in the RD&E system;
- To increase awareness of the project, its outputs to date and future activities; and

- To encourage all participants (particularly from the private sector) to consider the actions they can take to contribute to improving the operation of extension functions in the RD&E system nationally, regionally or locally.

### Joint effort required

The forum attendees were welcomed by Ian Halliday, Managing Director, Dairy Australia, who said that it was important that cross-sectoral representation occurred so that ideas and views could be shared at such events.



The Project Manager, Ian Linley, of Dairy Australia, also spoke about the need for collaboration on addressing some of the issues which were currently barriers to private sector extension working at its optimum.



The first keynote speaker for the event was Associate Professor Ruth Nettle, of the University of Melbourne, who heads the research component of the project.

She shared with the forum delegates the findings from national adviser and producer surveys conducted by the project.



Assoc Prof Nettle highlighted some key findings from the surveys which included:

- That farmers are seeing the challenge modern agricultural practice places on their skills, knowledge and cost structures.
- That a wide range of information sources were used by farmers, although it was independent advisers who formed the most common main source of information. However, no provider group had a monopoly on changed practices of farmers.
- Most on-farm change was related to changes in farm practice, followed by changes to inputs and products, farm business and finally infrastructure, machinery and equipment. In this sense, practice change included, quite strongly, management decisions.
- The near future (five years) is likely to see a net increase in use of information and advice, particularly in the fee-for-service sector but less so (significantly) in the Government sector.

In conclusion, the surveys indicated that:

- The way returns from R&D are increased (on-farm) via a more engaged private sector in extension is almost certainly via a collective (public, private, institutional) effort.
- Demand for services is there and largely the services are ready, willing and able to participate.

Some key factors in unlocking the potential appear to include:

- Increasing the real and perceived value of advice
- Supporting issues of access and opportunity within the RD&E system amongst key groups
- Increasing private-sector involvement in priority setting, research translation and product/service development
- Engaging a wide range of professional associations and supporting professional development in extension
- Developing policies (government/industry) and governance structures which positively assist to transition to a more co-ordinated/collaborative advisory and extension system, which harnesses the real strength of the collective effort.



### Panel shares views

The forum then involved a private sector extension panel, which addressed the topic of 'What needs to happen to improve how extension operates and functions in the RD&E system?'

The panel consisted of practitioners from private consulting services (large company and affiliated sole providers) through to agribusiness, producers/farming systems groups and RDC experienced operatives.

Panel members were:

- Farm management advisory business – Adrian Kennelly, MCG
- Producer and farming systems group Chair – Caroline Welsh, Birchip Cropping Group
- Sole extension provider/adviser – Elke Hocking, Elke Hocking Consulting
- Agribusiness – John Evans, Elders
- Rural R&D Corporation – Chris Murphy, Dairy Australia

The panel members each spoke and then took part in a Q&A session to provide further clarity around their views.

## International flavour

The forum was fortunate to attract international speakers, including Associate Professor Laurens Klerkx, Wageningen University, The Netherlands and Dr Mark Paine, Strategy and Investment Leader for People and Business at DairyNZ. Both are members of a panel which guides and advises the project.

They were asked to respond to the question of 'Is Australia alone in its extension challenges?'

Associate Professor Klerkx felt one of the challenges will be to ensure that public, industry and private goods were all addressed and that advisory services remain connected within the RD&E system.

He said it was important to consider that the rapid escalation of digital capability is impacting on how extension is conducted.

Dr Paine said his experience had shown that there was a clear need to embrace the opportunity that precision agriculture presented, with its ability to appropriately assemble data for decision-making purposes and its ability to provide for decision assisting platforms, such as smart phone apps. New forms of institutional arrangements were needed to make the most of such opportunities.



## Trials update

The forum also provided the opportunity to provide an update on trials which are taking place as part of the project.

The speakers for this session were:

- Introduction - Dr Jana-Axinja Paschen, University of Melbourne Trial Research Lead
- Knowledge management and private sector engagement trial - Jim Shovelton, Meridian Agriculture
- Extension roles and capacity in the digital agriculture age - Vivienne McCollum,

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- Building pathways and the capacity of the next generation of extension practitioners – Sally Martin, Sally Martin Consulting.
- Processor engagement - Jacqui Knee, RMCG.

Dr Paschen explained the objectives of the trials, which are effectively collaborative action research-based projects.



Within each of those trial areas the research identifies the type of change desired, how to achieve that change and the emerging system impact of private sector extension within the trial.

In doing such, better processes for stimulating private sector engagement are examined and potentially expanded and utilized for the longer-term benefit of the RD&E system and ultimately the longer-term benefit of the producer.

Polls conducted at the forum showed that the audience felt the trials were well targeted and that the trial component in the overall project design held real merit, particularly if the impacted industry took strong ownership.

Some audience feedback advised that qualitative or reflective monitoring of the developing trust and relationships of the key players in the trials may provide useful learnings.





## Closing comments

Associate Professor Ruth Nettle and Ian Linley closed the forum with a discussion of the opportunities to be engaged in the next steps.

This included providing delegates with copies of the presentations and further information to ensure the momentum from the event continued.

Post-evaluation of the forum has shown that collaboratively developing policies and actions of adequate scale (government/industry) which positively assist the transition to a more co-ordinated/collaborative advisory and extension system is key.

The theme around the need to develop a collaborative, inclusive and participatory approach which maintained industry and sector engagement was also very strong. Almost equally, participants urged an ongoing focus and clarity on project outcomes and bravery in ensuring outcomes and recommendations are actioned.

Addressing training and career pathways for the private sector extension; facilitating networking and information sharing; better understanding the cost and funding issues associated with elevated private provision and better articulating the value proposition for private sector involvement were also key themes.

Overall, the information and discussions were seen to be valuable in terms of highlighting opportunities to increase the effectiveness of private sector involvement in the RD&E system.

Many respondents praised the project research and forum in feedback opportunities describing it as a significant event for agricultural extension, with crucial cross-sectoral input and discussion.

## Where to find out more

Copies of the presentations, as well as videos from the event, will be made available soon at <http://rirg.fvas.unimelb.edu.au/ag-extension/project-activities/forum-events>



### For further information, contact:

Research Group Leader Ass Prof Ruth Nettle, Rural Innovation Research Group Lead, [ranettle@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:ranettle@unimelb.edu.au), (03) 8344 4581 or Ian Linley, Extension Coordinator, Dairy Australia, [ilinley@dairyaustralia.com.au](mailto:ilinley@dairyaustralia.com.au), 0422 814 579.  
<http://rirg.fvas.unimelb.edu.au/ag-extension>