



## Fact Sheet Two

# Regional forums



This project is supported by funding from the Australian Government Department of Agriculture and Water Resources as part of its Rural R&D for Profit programme.

*Stimulating private sector extension in Australian agriculture to increase returns from R&D 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 producers.*

*In the first half of 2016, the project:*

- Developed an understanding of private sector extension and how it engages with producers and research, development and extension (RD&E);
- Identified barriers to private sector involvement in agricultural extension, and;
- Developed models for interventions to enhance the private sector's capability in agricultural extension.

*The second phase of the project involves four trials to test these models. This fact sheet reports on the key findings of regional forums which were held in the first half of 2016.*

The project held a series of regional forums in the first half of 2016, which were attended by more than 150 advisers and producers from a range of agricultural industries. Forums were held in:

- Adelaide, South Australia (March)
- Traralgon, Victoria (April)
- Toowoomba, Queensland (May)
- Wagga, NSW (June).

The forums served four purposes, which were to:

1. Define key issues producers and advisers face related to the agricultural research, development and extension system;
2. Identify opportunities for improvement in engaging the private sector in extension;
3. Provide feedback on suggested trial concepts, and;
4. Make suggestions for a fourth trial concept.

The forums used a focus group approach to discuss current key issues and priority areas for private sector involvement in agricultural research, development and extension. Participant comments were noted down in 'workbooks'.

The forum responses were analysed in two separate steps: first, thematic clusters of key issues and opportunities emerging from the overall discussions

were established.

Second, specific responses to the trial concepts (for greater engagement of the private sector) were recorded.

Both data sets informed the overall design of the trial plan and methodology. In particular, they provided detailed information for the trial implementation (including a detailed problem definition, potential partners, locations etc.).

### Common themes

While some of the insights were industry-specific, eight common themes emerged from the four forums:

1. Collaborative knowledge production approaches were needed.
2. Research needed to be targeted differently with strategic-level support to address issues in the RD&E system
3. Financial constraints.
4. Collaboration and networking amongst different extension providers and across industries needs to be supported.
5. Making advice relevant requires more than information provision.

6. Whole farm systems approaches in RD&E are needed.
7. Research and research communication methods need to change.
8. Innovation and change in the way RD&E is done – new models are needed.

### Collaborative knowledge production

Participants saw value in involving all stakeholders in RD&E, so that the industry is involved in the journey of research, not just 'told the outcomes'.

They saw the need for a forum that created an equal partnership and better connection between producers, researchers and advisers.

They wanted to build a communication platform for co-operative engagement that:

- Encouraged and listened to producer feedback (e.g. surveying producers re R&D needs, producer-initiated projects);
- Was driven by producers and knowledgeable advisers;
- Enabled advisers to be involved in research projects;
- Resulted in projects with more focus on applied research, and;
- Utilised farmer/producer extension groups.

Participants acknowledged that a collaborative approach to knowledge production would involve sharing knowledge and developing skills together, including training in farming systems.

### Research and support

Forum participants identified the need for more targeted research and strategic support of different approaches to knowledge and how it is communicated, for example benchmarking and accreditation.

Participants also suggested drawing more on market (adviser/producer) needs for research directions.

### Financial constraints to accessing research and advice

Forum participants recognised that financial constraints limited the ability of both producers and advisers to be involved in RD&E, or even to access research results.

*"Most people won't pay for private advice,"* adviser participant.

*"Access to the latest research often comes at great time and financial costs for small businesses,"* adviser participant.

### Collaboration and networking

Forum participants saw opportunities for better collaboration and networking to promote cross-industry

exchange and partnerships both locally and across regions.

They wanted to build relationships and have more regular face-to-face connection between researchers, advisers and producers.

While they felt the R (research) was well developed in most industries, they saw opportunities to better transition findings into D (development) and E (extension). Participants wanted to explore opportunities for collaborative activities to:

- Involve producers and advisers (e.g. advisory committees);
- Work with private organisations for local best practices/ideas;
- Work across industries to pool information, resources, and ideas, and;
- Reduce duplication of research.

They saw benefits in combining a technical skill with other skills, such as communication. This would be particularly valuable when translating complex research into meaningful farming practices.

While forum participants were keen to see greater collaboration and networking, they acknowledged the need for a process that provided good governance.



### Making advice relevant

Forum participants placed a high priority on making advice more relevant, recognising that Australian producers are time-poor and operate in an era of information overload.

*"What is and what isn't relevant? Which adviser do I need? How can I set my priorities right?"* producer participant.

Participants reported that while significant funds are invested by rural research and development corporations on communication and extension, the



content was often not relevant at the farm level, or difficult to see how it could be applied in practice.

They saw a lack of trust in research, especially development research which changed the intensity of farming.

**Systems knowledge and practice**

Forum participants saw a need for translation of research into practice, particularly in the whole farm systems context.

Producers are looking for consultants (advisers in the private sector) who can provide advice that fits into the 'whole farm picture' but this requires hands on, practical experience and diverse skills whereas many advisers have specialist knowledge.

Participants reported a lack of farm advisers who could provide systematic/integrated advice that takes into account the whole farm business, including marketing, climate, machinery, nutrition, financial and people (HR/people) issues. They acknowledged a lack of opportunities for advisers to gain experience.



**Research and research communication**

Forum participants wanted better communication in relation to identifying research needs and extending the findings of research.

They wanted to see producers, researchers and advisers have an equal partnership in driving research priorities.

They suggested that better collaboration and 'more structured talking' would reduce the current level of waste and duplication of research.

When it comes to extending the findings of research, participants acknowledged that good research did not always equate to increased profit.

They identified challenges with:

- Measuring the true economics of research on

farm/whole business impact/gains;

- The time involved in deciphering and understanding research findings before extending;
- Finding people who can translate research output into recommended farming practices that have a real impact;
- The need for consistency of messaging and co-ordinated delivery of information;
- Facilitators with 'soft skills', and;
- Access to research data, research outcomes and better management.



**Innovation and change**

Forum participants called for 'fundamental changes' – a new model based on the core drivers for producers on the ground.

Recognising that many producers are multi-industry (e.g. livestock and crop producers), participants asked for 'out of the square' solutions, calling for a new model that would ensure application of R&D outcomes.

They saw the need for a 'cross-industry group' of strategic decision-makers, including producers and advisers, who could approve projects, and then allow the project team to implement them.

They wanted the complexity of extension to be recognised – that one solution doesn't fit all.

They recognised that the next generation of advisers and producers needed to be engaged and motivated to be self-directed learners, involved in the industry and able to understand the system implications of research findings.

An overview of thematic differences and similarities in the discussions with advisers and producers at the four regional forums in South Australia, New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria will be published separately.



### Trial concepts

Three trial concepts were presented at the regional forums, followed by a facilitated discussion to obtain feedback from participants.



Following the responses to the trial concepts presented at the forum, four detailed trial contexts were developed, each relating to gaps and priority areas for enhancing the role of the private sector in extension. These are:

1. Value chain/Processor Trial (shared interest focus);
2. Precision Ag Trial (technology focus);
3. Advisory Pathways Trial (business focus), and;
4. Knowledge Trial (technical and skills focus).

Running from 2016-2018, each trial will be led by an industry organisation (for example, Dairy Australia), and involve a co-design process using an action-oriented (plan-do-review) approach.

***See Fact Sheet Three: Trials to enhance private sector roles in extension***

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