

# Grower Group Networks Working Together with Researchers

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## Abstract

In Western Australia, grower-led groups are actively forming partnerships with other grower groups, researchers and private industry. As the farming system increases in complexity, existing partnerships may not be adequate and a new approach is needed. An organisational form that is designed to work in such complexity is the 'network'. Grower group networks are able to create an environment where shared understanding and/or collective action is used to achieve outcomes where there are no readily available solutions. In the last four years, two projects – the Grower Group Alliance and the Local Farmer Group Network – were established to support grower groups in a network to provide their members with access to the latest information and research.

The organisation of grower groups into networks has made them more accessible and relevant to researchers. In this paper, a description of the role grower groups and grower group networks can play in research projects is outlined, illustrated by case studies of successful partnerships. The most successful projects occur when grower groups and research providers develop and implement a new project together.

Grower group networks are also a very effective means of delivering research outcomes as they can provide researchers with opportunities for impact well beyond partnerships with one or two grower groups. Specially designed forums are just one new event which aim to maximise the interactions between grower groups, researchers and their industry partners. The paper concludes with a description of the future challenges for grower group networks.

## Key Words

Participation, adoption, extension, alliance, information delivery.

## Introduction

Over the past 10 years, the number of grower-led groups engaging in research and extension in Western Australia has increased rapidly. The groups have varied histories, but many began as a result of the Landcare movement in the 1990's. They formed to address local issues and solve common problems. Over time, the most successful groups were those that took responsibility for planning, implementing and monitoring their own activities. They applied local knowledge to focus on production and sustainability issues at a farm and catchment level and worked with government agencies to develop better farming practices. Growers began to have more control over the information they needed and the way it was delivered. There was a move away from 'top-down' approaches of scientists to farmers, towards extension methodologies that emphasised information flows, adult learning principles and participation by stakeholders (Marsh & Pannell, 2000).

Many of these groups have thrived and now actively seek out partnerships with other grower groups, researchers and private industry. In this age of people 'drowning in information', networks and partnerships are becoming more important as a way of finding and filtering information and gathering expert opinion on any matter (Colliver, 2001). There is evidence that growers who are active in networks are more likely to make changes to practice (Kilpatrick, 2004). Thus, growers who participate in agricultural and community organisations are more likely to adopt innovations because, not only do they become aware of a wider variety of new practices, they also have opportunity to test and change values and attitudes.

The Grains Research and Development Corporation (GRDC) and similar research investment bodies such as Meat and Livestock Australia, and Australian Wool Innovation are increasing their levels of investment into participatory research via grower groups. For example, the GRDC invests \$6.5 million a

year into farming systems projects involving 24 grower groups located across all the major cropping zones (Kearns, 2006). The inclusion of national initiatives such as “Grain and Graze” almost doubles this investment which contributes to approximately 30% of GRDC’s total investment into research in their “Practices” business group. Grower groups have traditionally accessed this funding through government agencies who then work with grower group collaborators to complete project milestones. However, this is rapidly changing as more grower groups take the initiative to submit funding applications as the lead organisation. Within Western Australia alone, the combined turnover of all major grower groups was approximately \$3.5 million in 2005 and this amount continues to increase.

In this paper, a description of the role grower groups and grower group networks can play in research projects is outlined, illustrated by case studies of successful partnerships. In this new environment, groups can be viable research partners as well as performing the more traditional role of demonstration and communication of research results.

### **Grower Groups in Western Australia**

Grower groups in Western Australia (WA) are community based and apply local knowledge, together with support from government agencies, to focus on production issues at a farm and regional level. For the purpose of this paper, the discussion is based upon independent, self-directed grower groups which are predominately comprised of broadacre cereal and livestock farmers. They are generally incorporated, not-for-profit organisations which act on behalf of, and are accountable to their membership. They have a range of characteristics, for example, some groups charge significant membership fees (up to \$330 per farm business), while others operate more informally. A more detailed description of grower groups in WA can be found in Gianatti and Llewellyn (2003). The groups are located throughout the grain production zone (wheatbelt) which covers an area of more than 7 million hectares from Northampton in the north, Mukinbudin in the east, and Esperance in the south east of the state. The majority of the groups aim to increase the production and profitability of their farm businesses through the adaptation of new technology while minimising the impact on their environment.

A key strength of the groups is the dedication of grower members to the development of production systems appropriate to their local environment. Through surveys of farmer members, field day and management committee discussions, priority activities for the groups are identified. In many cases, the groups develop strategies to address their issues independently due to geographic isolation from expertise located in government agencies and research support units. However, as the group’s priorities increase in complexity, greater emphasis is being placed on the development of strong relationships with key researchers and agribusiness companies to help them achieve their goals.

### *Networks and Partnerships*

Partnerships have been proven around the world as an effective way for any group or rural community to improve the livelihoods of rural families (Amudavi et al, 2005). They are effective because they stimulate economic growth and development, provided the partners have something of value to exchange with one another, such as knowledge. Researchers have knowledge to share with farmers, but in Australia these partnerships have been largely uncoordinated and informal. Nettle (2006) described partnerships between growers and researchers as the “joint development of knowledge and practices involved in managing technologies to meet industry challenges”. Through such partnerships, researchers learn about the local farming system and the farmers learn about the latest research. In this way, researchers and farmers use resources more effectively and build capacity.

As the farming system increases in complexity and its problems become more challenging, existing partnerships may not be adequate and a new approach is needed. An organisational form that is designed to work in such complexity is the ‘network’. Howden (2006) says, a network is a “system involving multiple nodes (individuals, agencies and organisations) with multiple linkages – not just informal patterns of interaction, but also structures through which public goods and services are planned, designed, produced and delivered”.

Locally focused grower groups provide a common focus for members to network with others in the district or region. The recent phenomena of grower groups networking with other grower groups outside their region and with interstate researchers has revolutionised the way growers view networking and the

value of it. They now realise a network approach is useful – especially when the knowledge and resources to solve a complex problem lies with many individuals and organisations, often outside their region. A grower group network is able to create an environment where shared understanding and/or collective action is used to achieve outcomes in the face of conflicting goals, or where there are several approaches to achieving a solution. These networks may be initiated by the research organisation, or more recently, by grower groups.

### **Grower Group Networks**

In the last four years, grower groups in Western Australia have recognised the advantages of networks and have formalised their involvement with each other. This has been catalysed through two GRDC funded projects – the Grower Group Alliance and the Local Farmer Group Network. These projects aim to support groups to provide their members with access to the latest information and research, which allows them to make the best possible decisions for their farming businesses. It also provides the opportunity to establish collaborative research and development projects between grower groups across the state. By working together, it allows the groups to maintain their local focus, yet also operate with a ‘critical mass’ to take action on a range of issues which they would not have been able to do individually. There are currently a total of 41 recognised grower groups in the wheatbelt of WA with a combined membership of over 2500 growers.

The Grower Group Alliance (GGA) began in 2001 when a number of established grower groups in WA recognised that extension and adoption of research within the grains industry could be improved. They felt that new innovations could be better communicated to growers and that important research, in many instances, was not applied to its full potential. The Mingenew-Irwin, Liebe, Facey, South East Premium Wheat Growers Association and Corrigin Farm Improvement groups, together with six research institutions submitted a proposal to the GRDC to form a coordinated network of grower groups, researchers and agribusiness companies. This was funded in 2002 and created the first full-time position for a coordinator of a grower group network in Australia.

The Local Farmer Group Network (LFGN) was established in 2004 and coordinates a variety of small to medium size grower groups in WA wheatbelt. Through a partnership between the WA Department of Agriculture and Food, the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences at the University of Western Australia and the GRDC, the project aims to support and coordinate small local grower groups to achieve their goals. LFGN groups have a diverse range of activities and interests. For example, some groups have community-orientated outcomes while others have a catchment management focus, but all groups within the network deal with grain production.

The two grower group network projects were developed by grower groups and are managed by an advisory committee comprised of growers, researchers, and private agribusiness. The grower group network projects aim to improve the communication between farmers, researchers and industry. According to Colliver (2001), one thing that will produce faster evolution of sustainable farming systems is a better flow of ideas and information. Group responsiveness to improved communication is determined by being able to ‘match’ the available information with what members of the groups want. This requires “an understanding of how different local communities interact and communicate” (Andrew et al, 2005). The GGA and LFGN coordinators overcome this challenge by working to gather information on the needs and interests of the different groups to improve the process of understanding.

Participation in the grower group network can be categorised into three levels: Core group members of the Grower Group Alliance, Associate group members of the Grower Group Alliance, and Local Farmer Group Network members. The characteristics of each type of group is summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1: Descriptions of typical grower groups in the Grower Group Alliance (GGA) & Local Farmer Group Network (LFGN)**

	<b>GGA Core Group</b>	<b>GGA Associate Group</b>	<b>LFGN group</b>
Size	Large (60 – 100 farm businesses)	Medium (30 – 60 farm businesses)	Small (5 – 30 farm businesses)
Structure	Formal management committee Specialist sub-committees	Formal management committee No sub-committees	Informal management committee No sub-committees

	Meet monthly	Meet monthly	Meet as required
Staff	More than 1 FTE staff (full time equivalent)	0.5 – 1 FTE (full time equivalent)	None
Activities	More than 5 large events per year	1 large event per year	1 small event per year
Timeframe	Long term goals	Short – medium term goals	Short term goals
External Funding	More than 1 major external govt. or industry partner	Looking to engage major external partner	None directly or looking to engage external partner
Research and demonstrations	Conduct own programme	Partner in collaborative projects	Partner in collaborative projects

Cross membership of different groups by individual growers is common, as they are often members of a large regional group and their local grower group. For example, in a community such as Munginlup, 100 kilometres west of Esperance, an individual grower can be an active member of the Oldfield Group (local group), a paying member of both the South East Premium Wheat Growers Association and the Western Australian No-Till Farmers Association (WANTFA) which are regional and state based grower groups respectively. The degree of cross membership is a sign of growers' desire for information to understand the complex problems they are experiencing in their farming systems and a willingness to engage at different levels.

### **Grower Groups as viable research partners**

A key characteristic of successful grower-driven groups is their ability to build constructive partnerships (Campbell, 1992). These partnerships are generally formed with researchers to enable groups to progress their locally driven research and development programs. In fact, the formation of many grower groups was initiated by the perceived need to attract more research and development to their local region. For most of their information needs, groups access research that has already been conducted and adapt it to their region. Group members conduct independent on-farm testing of known technology and analyse whether it is economically viable for other farmers in the region to adopt. Where there is an issue in the local area which has not previously been investigated, groups look for research partners with suitable expertise to help them examine the problem in further detail.

Most grower groups understand that they are not research providers and recognise that they cannot have hands-on involvement in all types of research, such as basic scientific research. However, groups are able to add value to the final outputs of many such programmes. In the case of a new crop variety, grower groups can add value by: carrying out farm scale testing; including the variety in field days; and extending the results well beyond their membership to other growers throughout the state. Importantly the group's involvement often provides an important level of 'impartiality'. To date, grower group involvement in the research process can usually be classified into three levels: 1) identification and supply of field sites; 2) roles within a larger project; and 3) co-development and leadership of research initiatives.

1) Identification and supply of field sites – Grower groups are in an excellent position to assist research providers to identify suitable field research sites. This benefits the researcher, and is welcomed by the group as it attracts research into their local district. It comes at no real cost to the group and once the site(s) have been identified, the researcher usually liaises directly with the individual host farmers. For example, the selection of trial sites for testing of a new crop variety. The group can provide a researcher with opportunities to communicate with members and other growers through newsletters, trial results books and speaking timeslots at field days and seminars. A strong relationship between research providers and the participating grower group means this process can be efficiently organised, potentially leading to wider extension of results and better acceptance of research outcomes.

2) Roles within a larger project – In this type of collaboration, grower groups complete one part of a larger project. This can range from surveying members and running 'focus groups' for farmer input into a project, to on-farm testing and organisation of extension events. Examples include national initiatives such as the Sustainable Grazing on Saline Lands project which consists of 120 grower demonstration sites in partnership with grower groups across five states. These are supported by five national research projects. Successful projects of this nature have grower group partners formally written into the project and its budget. This is becoming increasingly important as grower groups have more demands placed on their time.

3) Co-development and leadership of research – This is where grower groups (either individually or as members of a grower group network) and research providers develop and implement a new project together. It may be initiated through farmers identifying a knowledge gap in their farming system or research providers approaching a group with a new idea. In this kind of collaboration, it is important that the project idea is developed in partnership before a funding application is submitted. This allows partner grower groups to: discuss the idea with their members; consider the group's level of involvement in the project; examine the benefits of the project to the group, etc. In addition, it gives time for each collaborator to define their role in the project, taking into account their respective strengths. Recently, grower groups in WA have shown that they have the capacity to lead research projects in collaboration with scientists. This ensures genuine ownership of the project outcomes by growers. A detailed description of one such project is outlined in the case study below.

#### *Case Study of a grower group led project utilizing networks*

The Western Australian No-Till Farming Association's (WANTFA) conservation farming project is an excellent example of co-development and leadership of research by a grower group with its industry collaborators. The objective of the project is to determine the long term impact of permanent soil cover on soil organic matter and crop production. This will be achieved by comparing four cropping systems, each with different 'philosophies' in regards to the management of soil cover, crop selection and tillage technique.

The development of this project was a long process which began with a situation analysis of no-till in WA by international expert, Rolf Derpsch. The main findings of the analysis were that herbicide resistance, lack of cover on the soil (through over grazing and burning), and inadequate diversity in the rotation were the main barriers to increasing production in a no-tillage system. These conclusions were then discussed over a period of six months with in excess of 1100 growers at conferences, field days and industry consultation workshops. The discussions revealed that, in general, most growers agreed with its contents and were keen to test the recommendations in their farming systems.

In late 2005, WANTFA consulted extensively and engaged diverse industry partners to design a project to take no-till to the 'next level'. The involvement of a multidisciplinary team that included scientists, industry and growers was required as conservation farming systems are complex and have many components. Collaboration with grower groups occurred through local and nationwide grower organisations including the Grower Group Alliance, Local Farmer Group Network and Conservation Agriculture Alliance of Australia and New Zealand. Scientists from involved from the Department of Agriculture and Food WA, University of Western Australia, Curtin University, and CSIRO. Industry collaborators included fertiliser, chemical and soil testing companies together with research and development corporations.

The new conservation farming systems were to be developed for a range of climatic and soil conditions. As a result, two field testing locations were selected – the WANTFA main trial site (medium rainfall, medium soil type) and a site at the Mingenew-Irwin Group (medium rainfall, light soil type). A third site will be established after the first three years in the high rainfall, southern region of WA, with the participation of the LFGN. By July 2006, WANTFA and its partners had secured three years of funding from the Grains Research and Development Corporation and are in the process of establishing the two long term trial sites (to remain for at least 10 years).

#### *Case Study Discussion*

The WANTFA project has been very successful because it was based on a need identified by local growers. Through consultation with international and interstate experts, WANTFA and its research partners developed the project aims and activities. The outcomes will be delivered not only to WANTFA members but also to other farmers across the state and country. The project has allowed growers to become "active generators of new knowledge applicable to their local context" (Andrew et al, 2005).

The project operates within the framework of a "group facilitation-empowerment" model as described by Coutts et al (2005). The philosophy of this model is that rural industry participants are best served by allowing them to define their own problems and opportunities, and seek their own avenues to address

them. It is “based on a pragmatic understanding that it is the people in a specific situation that are best able to understand and act on the issues directly concerning them”. In addition, the ‘network’ approach used by WANTFA was able to bring together diverse groups with a range of knowledge to consider a problem from many angles. It was also effective in applying for project grants as the “inclusion of multiple interests (eg. service providers and end-users) is increasingly sought by funding providers” (Howden, 2006).

A major strength of this project is its structure which allows the active involvement of individual growers, grower groups and grower group networks in the research work. At the research sites, each of the cropping systems being trialled (eg. high residue with permanent cover vs current district practice) has been assigned a grower “champion”. Their role is to oversee the management decisions for their particular system philosophy. Each champion will be encouraged to test the relevant philosophy on their own farm for commercial evaluation.

The project encourages participation by grower groups through the establishment of research sites with regional groups. The sites were selected from WANTFA’s grower group partners in the GGA and LFGN networks. In conjunction with the project steering committee, these groups are responsible for site selection, identification of grower ‘champions’, in-season monitoring and extension of project results. The groups are equal partners in the project and are allocated funding from the project budget to run the research site and its extension activities. In future, it is intended that a number of satellite sites near the main trial site will be established by the local group to ensure the research is accessible to the majority of its grower members.

The successful development and implementation of this project was due in part to WANTFA’s participation in three distinct grower group networks. As stated above, these were the Grower Group Alliance, Local Farmer Group Network and Conservation Agriculture Alliance of Australia and New Zealand (CAAANZ). The location of research sites with regional grower groups was possible due to WANTFA’s linkages to the GGA and LFGN statewide networks. WANTFA is a core group member of the GGA, and many of its grower members are also members of LFGN groups. Excellent working relationships with the coordinators of both network projects made the selection (and subsequent negotiation) with partner grower groups a simple process. Through the WA grower group networks, WANTFA is able to distribute the results of its research to over 40 grower groups throughout the state. It is also able to collect feedback on current activities and gain new input from growers as the project progresses. Up to 2500 grower members of these groups are involved in this process.

The involvement of the CAAANZ network allows WANTFA to share information and resources with an additional five conservation agriculture groups throughout Australia and New Zealand. These large state based groups have between 1000 to 1400 members each which support growers to adopt conservation agriculture techniques. Each CAAANZ member is also completing a major research project similar to WANTFA’s utilising the networks in their own regions. Information is being shared across the CAAANZ network through grower group newsletters and websites, field days at the research sites, annual conferences, and study tours for growers to visit other CAAANZ groups.

WANTFA’s influence is not only confined to grower group networks. The group has a strong track record of collaboration and has developed partnerships with many other organisations that can offer knowledge, skills and resources to the project. These include government departments of agriculture, universities, agronomists, consultants and other industry service providers. Examples of contributions from these partners include representation on the project management committee, scientific review of the proposed experimental methodology and in-kind and cash contributions from industry partners. In addition, two researchers have indicated that they would be seeking funds to develop linked projects. The industry partners have an important role in the extension of the research results to fellow industry members and grower clients.

### **Grower groups provide a ready audience for extension of research results**

Grower groups and their networks are not only effective research partners in a complex system but are also a very effective means of delivering research outcomes. Networks of grower groups can provide

researchers with opportunities for greater impact, well beyond partnerships with one or two grower groups. An example of this is illustrated by the following case study.

#### *Case Study: Delivery of sub-soil constraints workshops through grower groups*

In 2005, researchers from the Managing Hostile Subsoils research team at the University of Western Australia (UWA) and Department of Agriculture and Food (DAFWA) utilised the GGA and LFGN networks to promote and deliver information on subsoil constraints. The information was packaged into a workshop format to assist growers to identify soil physical and chemical constraints to crop root growth in their own environment, such as subsoil acidity and compaction. Grower groups were required to provide three soil pits representing the main soil types in their region for the researchers to examine and characterise during the workshop.

The grower group network coordinators were able to help the research team add value to their workshop series in a number of ways. These included:

- Tailoring of workshop content – to ensure relevance to growers
- Appropriate promotion of the workshops – advised researchers to provide adequate lead time (8 weeks) for the grower groups to consult with their members about their interest
- “Expression of Interest” template – roles and responsibilities of both researchers and grower groups clearly explained on one page
- Encouragement of grower group responses – followed up grower groups interested in hosting a workshop
- Construction of workshop timetable – provided advice as to the most suitable times during the growing season to hold the workshops
- Coordination of feedback – from the groups to the researchers and vice versa.

By the end of the growing season, the research team had visited 15 grower groups throughout the wheatbelt, engaged over 300 growers, and 70 agribusiness personnel. The network coordinators acted as a “broker” on behalf of the research team to identify and liaise with groups who were interested in holding a workshop. The coordinators were also able to pass on feedback from the grower groups. For example, at the completion of the workshop series, the researchers provided a comprehensive report to the participating groups detailing the soil physical and chemical characteristics found in the soil pits. The groups found the report too technical for their needs and requested a more tailored report suitable for distribution to their grower members. The coordinators acted as a “go-between” in a situation where the groups would have previously felt hesitant to request more of the researchers. In turn, the researchers did not mind and were very happy with the number of workshops and uptake of the findings, and plan to build on the successful partnership by providing further workshops in 2006.

The impact of the workshops continues to be felt across the state. For example, as a direct result of the workshops in 2005, the Casuarina-Walkaway Farm Improvement Group uncovered large variations in subsoil acidity. They have now decided to investigate this issue further and have obtained funding from the GRDC Agribusiness Trial Network to investigate variable rate lime application to ameliorate subsurface acidity during 2006.

#### *Case Study Discussion*

In the sub-soil constraints case study, the research team were able to achieve far greater outcomes for their project by interacting with a network of grower groups.

Firstly, the packaging of information in a workshop format enabled new knowledge and skills to be delivered to groups of growers rather than on an individual basis. Research in agriculture suggests that learning in groups is effective for the majority of farmers (Kilpatrick et al, 2004). Through the network coordinators, researchers were able to access many grower groups simultaneously and therefore a much greater number of growers. Once the workshops were delivered, grower groups used their own networks to extend the outcomes of the workshops to a much wider audience than just those who attended the day. Information was shared through field days and visits between neighbouring grower groups. Many new ideas were generated as groups from various parts of the wheatbelt approached the common problem of subsoil constraints from different perspectives.

Secondly, the use of the network coordinators to tailor the workshop content increased the relevance of the topics to growers. When farmers are surveyed about extension, one of their most important concerns is a lack of practicality of the advice being provided (Vanclay and Lawrence, 1995). The customisation of content before it was presented to the growers tried to avoid this problem. In addition, flexibility was built into the program for grower participants to use their own skills to determine the problems that affected them and find solutions. Their knowledge of the landscapes, farming practices and local climate meant they were in the best position to find relevant solutions. Members of grower groups are able to integrate data into a systems perspective that a specialist scientist may not be able to do. This adds a multiplier effect for practice change and the implementation of new research.

Lastly, the location of grower groups across the state meant the researchers had to travel widely. Using their local knowledge, the network coordinators facilitated the researchers' ability to talk to growers in-person in their local area. This increased the researchers' credibility and ability to influence grower practices in the future.

### **Grower Group Network Forums: Encouraging grower and researcher interaction**

The Grower Group Alliance and Local Farmer Group Network projects aim to create opportunities for researchers to engage with grower groups in their network. This is achieved through the organisation of targeted events and the development of a simple tool called the "Expression of Interest" process for researchers to easily engage with grower group networks. These are described below.

#### *Grower Group Alliance - Annual Forum*

The Grower Group Alliance organises a one day "Grower Group and Researcher" Forum every year in August. Participants include growers and staff members from the 16 grower group members of the GGA and scientists from eight research institutions (Department of Agriculture and Food, CSIRO, CRC for Plant-based Management of Dryland Salinity, Centre for Legumes in Mediterranean Agriculture, WA Herbicide Resistance Initiative, University of WA, Murdoch University and Curtin University). Funding partners, consultants and representatives from agribusiness, banking and fertiliser companies also attend in recognition of the increasingly important role they play as partners in research projects. In 2006, regional catchment councils with expertise in natural resource management were involved for the first time. Approximately 60 people attend each year.

The aims of the GGA Forum have remained unchanged over the five years of the project. These are to:

1. Identify ways to improve communication within the GGA network to deliver better information to its members
2. Establish collaborative partnerships between grower groups, researchers and industry partners.

Each year, a unique focus for the event is developed by the GGA project management team. This team consists of a grower group executive officer, Department of Agriculture staff member, CSIRO researcher, a consultant and the GGA coordinator. The diversity of the team ensures the development of a program which caters for all participants. Previous forums have: compiled grower group priorities for research; identified research gaps in regards to soil health, livestock, and cropping pests and diseases; and explored the communication networks used to share information between grower groups and researchers.

A strength of the forum is its interactive format. A range of facilitative methods, such as small group discussions and brainstorming, are used to explore focus questions. All activities aim to provide opportunities for participants to interact, share ideas and expand their personal networks. In 2005, 85% of participants rated the "quality of interaction" at the forum a score of 8 or more out of 10 (Gianatti, 2005). The forum has also catalysed the formation of new research projects. Since 2004, as a direct result of contacts made at the forum, five new collaborative projects have been initiated between grower groups and researchers and funded by research and development corporations.

#### *Local Farmer Group Network - Regional Group Leader Meetings*

Grower group members of the Local Farmer Group Network approached interaction with industry partners in a more informal manner. This was in the form of five breakfast meetings held in regional centres throughout the state for the first time between April and July 2006. Industry partners were invited

to meet growers in their local community, rather than everyone travelling to one central location. A breakfast timeslot meant that growers were able to attend with minimal interruptions to their working day.

The aim of the meetings was to share opportunities and strengthen relationships between LFGN groups, regional government organisations and GGA grower groups located in the district. At each meeting, the attendees were drawn from the surrounding region only. These included chairpersons of LFGN and GGA groups (this generally encompassed five to six groups within a 100 – 150 kilometre radius) and representatives from industry partners such as the Department of Agriculture and Food, catchment councils, Regional Development Commissions and the GRDC Western Panel. The meetings had a limit of ten participants to ensure good personal relationships were established.

The most striking observation from these meetings was that many of the group representatives had not met each other before. In addition, both the regional development commissions and the catchment councils were meeting with the groups for the first time – and in some cases, even with each other. Participants liked the small meetings as they encouraged efficiency and were able to maintain focus. The attendance of the larger GGA groups was beneficial as it gave the LFGN groups a chance to hear about their activities and discover they had many issues in common. WANTFA was represented at all the meetings which provided insights from a statewide group and the bigger picture. A key learning from the meetings was that participants need to be invited from groups with similar farming systems. Also, consultation with participants before the meetings to establish a focus topic would improve discussions.

#### *Expression of Interest” process*

A simple tool developed for researchers to easily engage with grower group networks is the “Expression of Interest” (EOI) process. The EOI process gives researchers and other potential grower group partners (eg. agribusiness) a simple way to outline upcoming research projects, trials or workshop opportunities they wish to offer to grower groups. On one A4 page, the resources/skills the researcher partner can offer, and the expectations of the grower group (provision of sites, extension opportunities etc.) are outlined. The completed template is emailed directly to all grower groups, and advertised on the grower group network websites and newsletters. In the 12 months since the process was first implemented in 2005, 36 EOI’s have been distributed to the grower group networks and over 70% have been acted upon by the groups.

The EOI process is not new, but it is the first time it is being applied to a network of grower groups. The main advantage of the process is that it enables researchers to efficiently identify potential partners for their research projects and allows for an equitable distribution of opportunities to grower groups. Previously, researchers generally contacted groups they knew or had worked with before. The use of the EOI process now allows small, low profile groups (and new groups) to have similar opportunities to the larger, more established groups.

#### **Challenges for grower group networks**

Future challenges for grower group networks include:

- *Balancing individual group aims with network aims* – Grower groups must deliver benefits to their members through their activities. Membership of a grower group network at times requires effort and does not guarantee that individual groups will see a direct benefit. Grower groups may be less willing to share their ideas with the network as the amount of available funding declines. Instead, they may develop an idea themselves to gain a lead role in new projects.
- *Future funding* – This is a key issue for grower group network projects. Without funding to employ the network coordinators, many of the combined activities may cease to exist. The motivation and drive to get things done for the benefit of all the member groups would perhaps disappear. Grower group networks need strategies to secure their future in a world of shrinking budgets and government funding.
- *Clear roles and responsibilities* – Clarification and communication of each partners’ role is an essential element of a collaborative project within a network. Establishment of roles and responsibilities through the EOI process at the beginning of a project will go some way to ensuring that conflicts are minimised and expectations are met. The development of a feedback mechanism between researchers, host growers and the grower group would aid the identification of problems, allowing for their timely resolution.

- *Limits on farmer member time* – This is the number one constraint stated by growers that restricts their full involvement in grower group activities, and hence their involvement in grower group network activities. Research partners need to be aware that farming is a full time business and time constraints are increasing, particularly as farm size increases and labour availability declines. “Burn out” of group leaders is also a challenge and better succession planning for grower groups is required.
- *Measuring the impact of information delivered through grower group networks* – Evaluation and attribution of adoption to a grower group network is difficult as growers receive information from multiple sources, any of which could trigger practice change. The benefits of the network must be demonstrated to member groups to ensure they continue to participate in statewide initiatives.

## Conclusion

The development of grower group networks is part of a unique and evolving form of farming systems research in Australia. The organisation of grower groups into networks has made them more accessible and relevant to researchers.

Understanding what networks and their affiliated partnerships can and cannot do is critical. Through the establishment of grower group networks, researchers are now able to:

- Access grower groups with the capacity and willingness to engage as research partners
- Identify new collaborative research partners (grower groups and agribusiness)
- Consult with growers to identify and refine research ideas
- Gain feedback on the relevance of their work from growers
- Increase the impact of their extension activities by delivering results through grower groups.

Clever use of grower group networks by researchers through participation in grower group forums and other initiatives creates opportunities for future collaboration.

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