



## **Grower Group Alliance Media Release**

### **Interstate tour to improve WA grower group business models**

There is no two grower group business models the same, they all have different strengths and strategies in how they service their grower members and extend information.

This was the take home message from the Grower Group Alliance study tour, with five grower group staff and committee, seeking to understand grower group business models across Victoria and South Australia.

Seeing different perspectives from other grower groups and producers on how to improve productivity and sustainability has sparked new ideas for the tour group to take home and trial. The group valued the opportunity to learn the inside workings of the different grower groups and farming businesses they visited.

“I was impressed with the openness in sharing information such as business operational structures, governance, staffing and extension and communications strategies”, Southern DIRT Executive Officer Pip Crook said.

“It provided me with a fantastic insight into the diverse models of grower groups and now the challenge will be seeing how we can utilise the best bits of each model in Southern DIRT as we review our strategic plan over the next few months.”

The GGA tour began in Melbourne where a visit to Dairy Australia (DA) allowed the groups to learn how extension was undertaken in the dairy industry and how they have moved beyond a reliance on state government extension officers to being supported by private consultants and DA directly. This was followed by a national grower group meeting hosted at Rabobank, a key commercial partner for many groups across WA.

The meeting discussed the opportunities for collaboration between farming systems groups across Australia, including Central West Farming Systems, Farmlink, Riverine Plains and Eyre Peninsular Agricultural Research Foundation, and some of the successes and challenges these groups are facing.

Day two saw the group travel to Geelong to meet with Southern Farming Systems (SFS) Executive Officer Jon Midwood to hear how the group operates across multiple regional branches in the high rainfall zones of Victoria and Tasmania.

“What really stood out about the SFS operations was their membership and sponsorship structures, plus their capacity to deliver benefits to members across a large geographical area”, North East Farming Futures Innovation Officer Jenny Thomas said.

“The group uses tiered membership and sponsorship levels that provides more targeted value that is delivered to members and partners.”

A visit to farmer Melville Charles Windermere property, Berrybank Farms, allowed the group to see a fully integrated approach to grain and pork production and waste management, and sparked thoughts about post-farm gate opportunities.



“It was interesting to see the efficiency of their farming system that has zero waste. Grain is produced to feed the pigs, piggery waste is converted into bagged fertiliser and energy”, Corrigin Farm Improvement Group committee member Andrea Blake said.

Another highlight was visiting the Birchip Cropping Group (BCG), one of the largest grower groups in Australia with 430 members and 20 staff. The group heard from CEO Chris Sounness, the extension and communications team, and the trials manager to learn how they operate and get tips on how to improve some of their own activities.

“BCG’s ability to revenue raise within their own operation and membership was inspiring,” Fitzgerald Biosphere Group Executive Officer Anne Sparrow said.

The group, although impressed with BCG’s size and structure, noted that their model may not be successful in WA due to strong grower group network already in operation.

“It’s good to travel to other parts of Australia and see other grower group’s business models.

But overall, it highlighted that we are still facing similar challenges in terms of long term funding, sponsorship and how to best service our membership needs”, Corrigin Farm Improvement Group Executive Officer Veronika Crouch said.

Heading north-west to the Mallee Sustainable Farming Inc (MSF), Executive Officer Stuart Putland provided an overview on how MSF work closely with consultants to deliver the on-farm trials aspect of their business, with MSF staff focussed on extension, communication and community based activities. The group also faces the challenge of working across three states, SA, Vic and NSW.

“Whilst the group’s primary focus is on solving agronomic issues across their large region, they have also been able to successfully incorporate community based activities, like cooking classes and the father son footy match, which was really interesting to hear,” Ms Thomas said.

A visit to the Hart Field Site Group on the final day of the tour allowed the tour group to get an insight into how to operate a group which has a focus on managing a main trial site, with an attendance of more than 500 at the annual Spring Field Day event.

“It was fantastic to see how Hart has achieved solid research with the capacity to extend their findings in an innovative way, whilst supporting their regional community,” Ms Crouch said.

Tour leader Rebecca Wallis said while the tour explored different grower group models and there were many similarities with operational issues common in WA, it also built strong, lasting networks across Australia that will be valuable into the future in developing collaborative research and extension projects.

“The group have not only made contacts interstate, but within their own state too, networking with like-minded staff who broaden outlooks and challenge ideas within their own grower group,” she said.

The Grower Group Alliance is a non-profit, farmer driven organisation connecting grower groups, research organisations and agribusiness in a network across WA. The GGA coordinates WA and interstate study tours every two or three years, and supports groups in undertaking their own tours. The GGA project is currently funded by the Department of Agriculture and Food WA.



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*Photo Caption (A):* Tour Group at BCG office in Birchip; Jenny Thomas (North East Farming Futures), Pip Crook (Southern DIRT), Veronika Crouch and Andrea Blake (Corrigin Farm Improvement Group), Anne Sparrow (Fitzgerald Biosphere Group), Rebecca Wallis (Grower Group Alliance) with BCG staff Alli Elliott and Justine Severin.

*Photo Caption (B):* Tour Group at South Farming Systems Main Trial Site in Inverleigh, Victoria; Anne Sparrow (Fitzgerald Biosphere Group), Pip Crook (Southern DIRT), Jon Midwood (Southern Farming Systems Executive Officer), Veronika Crouch (Corrigin Farm Improvement Group), Rebecca Wallis (Grower Group Alliance), Andrea Blake (Corrigin Farm Improvement Group) and Jenny Thomas (North East Farming Futures)