

LOOKING OVER THE FENCE:



shared solutions

The value of grower trips as an extension tool

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Grain growers in Victoria's Wimmera and Mallee have improved the productivity, profitability and sustainability of their farm business as a result of partaking in Birchip Cropping Group (BCG) led industry development trips. They are also helping to extend the lessons learned.

Since BCG's inception in 1992 - which was inspired by a farmer excursion to the Hart Field Days that year - the group has run a number of trips for farmers. Initially these trips were arranged opportunistically, however in recent years, a concerted effort has been made to ensure trips address local farming issues and are heavily focused on professional development.

In 2014 and 2015 BCG, with support from the Grains Research and Development Corporation (GRDC), organised two grower trips:

- an Industry Development tour of the Western Australian Northern Agricultural Zone to see how growers there were managing wild radish and herbicide resistance (two issues becoming more prevalent locally); and
- a trip through Victoria's south west and Wimmera regions looking at stubble management strategies (delivered as part of the GRDC stubble initiative, project No. BWD00024).

To ensure value from these trips, from both a grower and funder perspective, BCG ensured the places visited were relevant and interesting with industry experts and leading farmers invited to meet and address the group. In return, growers were tasked with extending their learnings and experiences to their local communities. This has included delivering presentations at field days, appearing in YouTube films and taking part in media interviews.

It has been observed that much of the learning on grower trips comes from the interaction and discussion between trip participants. The dynamic that is created when like-minded people connect, travel together and witness how other growers are tackling challenges and opportunities seems to accelerate the learning process.

Anecdotal evidence supports the results of formal evaluations which suggest that practice change and the adoption of new technology is fast-tracked after participation in grower trips.

Creating positive experiences, and an environment where networks are easily formed, provides growers with the confidence to make changes or adopt new technology.

There are benefits that flow both ways for trip participants and hosts, as well as the broader farming community.

LESSONS LEARNT

- Grower trips provide an important professional development opportunity for farmers.
- Creating positive experiences enhances learning and the formation of fruitful networks.
- Evaluation surveys indicate that the majority of farmer trip participants intend to make a change to farm practices.

CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

Grower trips require a significant commitment of time by often, under-resourced and time-poor extension staff. As well as the time and cost involved in facilitating the trip, there is also the organisation which needs attention to ensure maximum outcomes.

The benefits to flow from these professional development experiences for farmers can extend to the broader industry as participants adopt technology and share their learnings.

'Looking over the fence' inspires new ideas and the creation of supportive professional networks.

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IMPROVING THE PROSPERITY OF FARMERS AND AGRICULTURAL COMMUNITIES

BCG is a not-for-profit agricultural research organisation led by farmers in the Wimmera Mallee region of Victoria.

BCG conducts field research and each year hosts a number of large and small events for grain growers and livestock producers. Scan the QR code to learn more about BCG.

Justine Severin is a member of the BCG extension team. Her work includes BCG communications, public relations and events. She has organised and led farmer trips in 2014 and 2015.



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