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## CASE STUDY

### Regional collaboration and diversification the hallmark of West Midlands Group

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**The West Midlands Group (WMG) is a broadacre focused grower group that has diversified to meet new agribusiness opportunities in its region.**

Up to 90 per cent of WMG farmer members operate mixed farming enterprises, meaning that livestock are an essential contributor to farm businesses. The region is also home to a developing horticultural sector, including potato and citrus producers, due to plentiful groundwater and proximity to markets.

To meet the changing agribusiness landscape, the WMG organisation has evolved from a Natural Resource Management (NRM) and grains research focus to include a wider variety of growers. Changes include the formation of a livestock sub-committee and a potato sub-committee. WMG has increased its scope of research initiatives and funding opportunities as a result of this wider vision.

#### Identifying Opportunities

##### Livestock

WMG was primarily focused on grains trials and research up until 2012. With the majority of members running livestock as part of their business enterprises, WMG recognised there was a service delivery gap. The group formed a livestock sub-committee to ensure that livestock issues in the region were addressed, and research and development opportunities were pursued.

The group has recruited a highly experienced Livestock Production and Innovation Manager, Dr Gina Micke, and is working to lead and deliver livestock research and development projects in the West Midlands region and beyond. The group also utilises a livestock ambassador to advocate for the industry.

##### Potatoes and horticulture

In late 2014, a group of potato growers in the West Midlands region formed a grower group to work together on production and regional issues. The growers approached WMG with the concept of becoming a sub-committee of the well-established group. The WMG board supported the idea and the WMG Potato Committee was created.

By joining WMG, the potato group could immediately benefit from WMG's incorporated status and its established structure and governance. The potato group were able to tap into the group's resources and capacity rather than relying on volunteer management and administration. The move reduced duplication of administration and promoted regional collaboration. For WMG, the new members offered an opportunity to expand their services and make new connections across different agricultural sectors.

WMG advanced its involvement in the horticulture sector following an agreement with Northern Valleys Agribusiness to work with growers in the Chittering/Gingin area to lead research and development and connect producers across the food bowl industries.

#### Next steps

Since the inclusion of the different industries into the WMG membership, the group has embraced opportunities to learn about different sectors through initiatives such as study tours and RD&E projects. The group's study tour to visit a citrus and a potato farm was a sell-out event, attracting grower members from a wide demographic of ages, industries and interests. Those who attended gained insight into enterprises different to their own and showed great interest in the lessons that could be drawn across sectors. The success also sparked the inclusion of a citrus tour at the main WMG 2016 Spring Field Day.

By expanding the group's focus to cover horticulture, WMG was well positioned to develop and coordinate the Northern Valleys Agribusiness project, which successfully secured funding from the Royalties for Regions' Ag Sciences R&D Fund Grower Group Grants program. The three year project aims to support agribusinesses in the Shires of Chittering, Gingin and Dandaragan. Initiatives under this project include working with vegetable growers to improve the supply/demand balance in the marketplace, identifying new export market opportunities and considering value-add solutions. The project will also work on improving regional information sharing for policy development to support local agribusiness. WMG plans to expand into the region to fill the grower group gap that currently exists in the Northern Valleys.

WMG has also partnered with Harvey Beef, DAFWA and Northern Beef Futures to develop a beef backgrounding project that will support the expansion of the WA cattle industry. The project, which is being funded through an Ag Sciences R&D Fund Grower Group Grants program, aims to develop new systems for backgrounding beef to encourage a consistent, year round supply of export specification product.

These projects are the direct result of WMG adapting to change and moving to diversify and collaborate with regional partners. The selection of the Dinner Hill area in Dandaragan as a prospective irrigated agriculture hotspot as part of the Water for Food initiative adds further weight to WMG's decision to expand its services into horticulture. The group has ensured they are well placed for any future change in the composition of agribusiness in the region while meeting the existing needs of its current membership base.

In the future WMG sees the potential for a specific focus on the value chain of food production, including adopting a local, regional brand.

#### Key Learnings

The group recognises that to remain successful they must keep adapting, be innovative, and be open to doing things differently. In an environment where there is constant change, WMG understand that losing momentum means missing out on opportunities. A key learning for the WMG has been to keep ahead of the game by embracing change. This is reflected in its membership with more than 120 farm business members, representing around 270 farmers across the grains, livestock, horticulture industries.

The group has been proactive about recruiting the right people and identifying projects that best service the needs of its members. For example, in its early days WMG was primarily funded through NRM sources. As availability of this funding dried up, the group switched focus to production research through GRDC funding. Today the group is recruiting skills and experience to successfully deliver its R4R projects, which will augment its existing in-house skills base.

A significant accomplishment for the group has been the establishment of a diverse board, robust committees and experienced staff. The WMG board consists of wide cross section of people from the community, such as growers, accountants, agribusiness executives and communication specialists. They offer a diverse range of skills and experience enabling them to effectively guide and direct the group. WMG believes in enlisting and engaging people who want to make things happen and see things change for the benefit of its members.

Finally, collaboration has been a major driver of success for WMG. With the guidance of experienced people including staff, committee, advisors and members, the group has openly encouraged collaboration with new sectors rather than forming individual, segmented groups throughout their region. Being open minded and flexible has allowed WMG to embrace new opportunities to the benefit of all involved.

