

# Project Summary

*Grant to assist the Ag Excellence Alliance, on behalf of the National Grower Group Collective, enhance delivery of agricultural research and extension activities.*

Supporting the capacity of locally driven grower groups is essential for the continued delivery of applied research and extension, and in supporting practice change on-ground. Highly skilled grower groups are well placed to engage with NRM and industry R&D organisations.

This project took a bottom-up approach, ensuring engagement by delivering through established networks and allowing activities to be targeted to regional needs. The project has successfully achieved both its intended outcomes, being:

1. Developing and implementing a national extension strategy for broad acre / mixed farming agriculture
2. Developing and delivering a national capacity building program to increase the long-term sustainability and effectiveness of grower groups to deliver innovation and practice change to the farming sector.

The project was managed by the Ag Excellence Alliance (SA) supported by a steering committee made up of representatives from the Ag Excellence Alliance (SA), Grower Group Alliance (WA), Birchip Cropping Group (Victoria), Central West Farming Systems (NSW), Southern Farming Systems (Victoria), FarmLink (NSW), University of Melbourne and Ag Consulting Co.

## Achievements

A comprehensive national extension strategy was developed by a collective of six major grower groups from WA, SA, Victoria and NSW plus representatives from Landcare Australia Limited and the University of Melbourne for grower groups to drive adoption of innovative and sustainable farming practices.

A targeted extension training program was developed after assessing and prioritising the core competencies required to deliver an effective extension program.

Two training programs were conducted involving 55 project officers from 36 organisations from across WA, SA, Victoria and NSW using participatory action principles to develop their extension skills in project development, delivery and evaluation.

The project helped to strengthen the national grower group collective creating a legacy for future

collaboration in the development and delivery of sustainable agriculture innovation and full implementation of the *Developing Extension Excellence* strategy.



## Key Project Findings

- Nationally, grower groups (farming systems groups) are significant players in the delivery of sustainable agriculture projects that have a focus on the local adaptation and extension of innovative and sustainable practices. Having a strong grower group network that can respond collectively to opportunities of mutual benefit can only enhance the cost benefits of investment in sustainable agriculture development and extension that is farmer owned and driven.
- Covid restrictions over the course of the project have meant on-line techniques for workshop delivery have had to be fine-tuned and new delivery tools learnt. Full on-line workshop to hybrid models, with some participants on-line and others face to face, have proven their value, however face-to face is still considered the most effective method of delivering this type of training.
- There is still considerable demand for this type of on-the-job training to build the skills and confidence of project officers planning and delivering extension. Whilst extension principles can be taught in the classroom, learning with industry peers, and putting them into practice in project delivery is a much more effective way of developing skills and confidence. Incorporating proven extension principles and practices into project delivery is critical to achieving effective, long-lasting outcomes.

- Ongoing engagement with the grower group representatives is essential to get collective buy-in to ensure implementation of the actions identified in the *Developing Extension Excellence* strategy.

The development of a national extension strategy for grower groups to drive adoption of innovative and sustainable farming practices.

The national extension strategy development focussed on assessing the skills required to provide effective leadership, management and technical skills in developing and delivery of extension-based programs; and strategies for imbedding processes based on robust social science concepts and frameworks into extension project development. The co-designed strategy titled “Developing Extension Excellence” outlines three key strategies to advance extension delivery and outcomes by the grower group network, these being collaboration, capacity building, and extension development and delivery, each with a range of actions to implement the plan, plus a stakeholder engagement plan. The plan provides a solid platform for the future development of extension capacity building.

The delivery of a capacity building program for grower groups

The *Building Agricultural Extension Training Program* was developed based on the outcomes of the formative project workshop held in Melbourne in 2019. Content was developed based on the core competencies identified and prioritised as critical to delivering an effective extension program:

1. Extension planning and design (Highest Priority)
2. Facilitation Skills (Second Highest Priority)
3. Apply Technical expertise (Third Highest Priority)
4. Principles, people & tools for adoption (Equal Third Highest Priority)
5. Professional Practice (Equal Third Highest Priority)
6. Management & Implementation ((Equal Third Highest Priority)
7. Networking skills (Fourth Highest Priority)
8. Communication (Fifth Highest Priority)
9. Financial & Business driven decisions (This was considered an elective – not a High Priority).



The training program consisted of three components:

1. Workshops - Three workshop blocks of two days each covering:
  - Introduction to extension design and practice
  - Facilitating learning
  - Evaluation and reporting back
2. Webinars- Three technical content Webinars.
3. Mentoring - Participants could access one hour of mentoring with the project team members.

