



Consolidating targeted and practical extension services for Australian farmers and fishers

Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation (AgriFutures Australia)

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This summary is an excerpt from the [final report](#), with minor edits made to ensure it meets departmental style and accessibility requirements.

Summary

In Australia we have a proud tradition of extension and adoption within primary industries. Extension services play an important role in assisting Australian farmers and fishers to adopt research and development (R&D), to innovate and change, and to keep their business profitable.

The Consolidating targeted and practical extension for Australian farmers and fishers project was welcomed as the start of a much needed national conversation about the future of extension. Funded under the Rural Research and Development for Profit program, it was an ambitious project that aimed to reverse some of the drivers of fragmentation that are impacting on delivery, to evaluate the extension system, and to consolidate extension knowledge.

The project also identified practical and achievable actions that will lead to improvements to our extension systems, helping it meet future demands and opportunities in primary industries.

Key project deliverables and outcomes were:

- a practical extension information 'hub'
- an evaluation of the current extension environment systems
- information and advice on strategic next steps to improve the efficiency of extension
- undertaking forums and information exchange.

Extension hub

A key achievement of the project was the creation of a web-based 'hub' to support extension professionals as they plan and deliver information to Australian farmers and fishers.

The extension hub consolidates and organises existing knowledge, tools and resources in an accessible way so that it can be easily used to inform the design and implementation of extension by public and private providers. The site, established as the Extension Practice Community of Practice (CoP), went live November 2016. It currently contains 30 curated articles on extension relevant to target audiences. They are tagged with keywords and linked to other sources including YouTube. Further resources are being added by the CoP leader. Currently

there are 1300 users of the site. Communities of Practice on crop diseases and crop nutrition are also housed on the site. Visitors can listen to podcasts, read articles or 'ask an expert' technical questions on the subject area of the Community of Practice.

Current extension environment and systems

The project also involved an evaluation of the current extension environment and systems to help better understand system strengths and weaknesses, who the key players are, and what are their needs. This work included an assessment of current and potential future extension delivery approaches and how these approaches could be used.

Insights, issues and national trends within the current system of agricultural extension in Australia are largely consistent with the literature and can be summarised as:

- an increasing demand from farmers for extension services that support both tactical and strategic decision making. The agricultural extension system needs to respond to this need, however improvements at the individual project, state or industry level will not, on their own, be enough to meet this demand
- an imperative for increasing for industry and government co-ordination in agricultural extension relating to
- the diversity of extension providers and potential for greater private sector involvement
 - regional extension efforts that are cross-industry
 - extension capability and capacity planning and development initiatives
 - engaging public and private sector extension providers in research priority setting and planning
 - supporting cultural change in farmers' willingness to pay for advice
 - recognition that the current extension system is favouring larger farms
- an increasing requirement for leadership and expertise in the planning, design and review of research, development and extension (RD&E) programs from an extension and innovation perspective
- an increasing need for new arrangements in the structures of RD&E projects and programs that support co-innovation. The diverse range of service providers in extension provides the context for more complex and agile extension approaches
- a need for continued support for building extension capability and supporting development of best-practice extension approaches through innovative approaches like the Extension Hub and the Communities of Practice it supports.

Strategic next steps

The project identified key issues that are impacting the effectiveness of the extension system and provided information and advice on strategic next steps for Australian primary industry extension.

The findings of the project consultants GHD, Quantum Market Research and the University of Melbourne provide insight and guidance on the nature of, and focus areas for, strategic action at the national, industry, and regional scales in order to improve the efficacy of the system and meet farmers needs in the longer term. The project Expert Panel suggest that it is the role of the

Research and Innovation Committee of the Primary Industries Ministerial Council to consider and undertake on these strategic actions.

Forums and information exchanges

The project conducted forums and facilitated information exchange activities that were designed to enhance coordination and leadership of extension provision across Research and Development Corporations, state and territory governments, industries, private extension service providers, universities and other reliant stakeholders. Many extension professionals who participated expressed how valuable they were; clearly for lasting impact they will need to continue.

The project recognised that agricultural extension is being delivered by a diversity of organisations and providers, so there is no single sector or institution to drive the identified priorities and undertake the suggested actions, rather, a collaborative approach is required going forward. In bringing together key participants committed to improving approaches to extension and improve the prosperity of primary industries, the project has helped to ensure that collaboration has already begun, there is an excellent tool in place to facilitate modern extension delivery and a pathway forward has been suggested. The project has helped create the foundations and establish an effective leadership environment to catalyse action to strengthen extension delivery.

The project was funded by the Australian Government's Rural Research and Development for Profit program.