



Georgie Keynes helping producers with pasture measurement techniques.

Winter pasture project the start of something 'BIGG'

Barossa Valley producer groups unite in award-winning project

The Barossa Valley region in South Australia has a strong history of local producer groups in the sheep, dairy and beef industries.

Although the Angaston Agricultural Bureau had links with all these industries, there was no organised avenue for farmers from the different industries to get together to share information, ideas and approaches.

"Sheep graziers might have been thinking they'd really like to learn from the dairy guys how they grow such good winter pastures, but they never had a forum in which to have that chat," said Georgie Keynes, Facilitator.

With production pressures increasing across all industries, shared questions were becoming shared goals, sparking critical new opportunities for communication, collaboration and cooperation.

The approach

Members of the Angaston Ag Bureau realised the key to bringing these very different industries together was identifying a common profit driver – sustainable winter pasture production.

The Winter Pasture NRM Project began in 2012-13 when the bureau facilitated a partnership between local producer groups and the Adelaide and Mount Lofty Ranges Natural Resources Management (NRM) Board.

Funded by the board's Sustainable Industry Grant, with funds also contributed by Sheep Connect SA, the Winter Pasture NRM Project brought together four existing producer groups for the first time:

- Angaston Ag Bureau (project administrator)
- North Rhine Sheep Group
- Mt Pleasant Beef Group
- Barossa Mid-North Dairy Discussion Group.



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The overall aim of the project was to promote sustainable farming while enhancing productivity and NRM outcomes.

The idea was to provide a forum that could get farmers from different industries talking, learning and acting to improve the productivity of their winter pastures, whilst increasing NRM knowledge and activities.

Pasture walks

Pasture walks were one of the most effective and popular activities organised in the project. Pasture walks were held at Moculta, Eden Valley and Keyneton, with participants visiting sheep, beef and dairy pastures.

The informal setting helped people relax and bounce questions around.

The walks were well supported by agronomists from Farmer Johns and Coopers Mt Pleasant as well as seed company representatives, whose ideas were another great discussion starter.



Hans Greatz and Georgie Keynes examining a pasture cage during a pasture walk.

“The 2012 growing season was really tough in the Barossa with only half the annual rainfall and very little in winter and spring. Although it was a difficult year for farmers, it was a good opportunity to demonstrate management options in a changing climate,” said Ms Keynes.

“Pasture walks gave growers the chance to get together, compare pastures, have a laugh and discuss options, like whether to sell stock, feedlot their animals or buy feed in.”

A bus trip to the Fleurieu Peninsula was a major highlight with more than 40 farmers taking the chance to visit pastures in different production systems.

A pasture quality walk was also organised specifically for the Dairy Discussion Group at their request.

“Farmers came to see the pasture walks as a great source of

information. Even guys that had been farming for 20 plus years would wait to see what they’d learn at the next pasture walk before changing practices,” said Ms Keynes.

Action plans

Another major outcome of the project was action plans.

Over 100 plans were developed by individual farmers in consultation with the project facilitator, local agronomists and the Natural Resources AMLR District Officer.

Action plans helped farmers and producer groups focus on on-farm issues, what they could do to improve productivity and quantify changes as well as NRM outcomes.

The aim was to develop achievable, cost-effective and relevant plans for each producer’s property.

“Action plans helped farmers become even more engaged, looking closely at all aspects of their pastures as well as other people’s paddocks and situations,” said Ms Keynes.

A template was designed to help farmers fill out their action plan and give them measurable targets to aim for.

Individual action plans covered topics such as soil testing, selection of pasture species, pasture quality and quantity, stocking rates and rotational grazing.

Action plans were shared between groups and the wider community through pasture walks, newsletter articles and case studies.

Pasture monitoring and measuring

Monitoring and measurement is a key part of sustainable management of winter pastures and so the project aimed to teach these techniques to new farmers in the region or refresh the techniques for those interested in honing their skills.

At the Moculta pasture walk, agronomists from local rural suppliers Famer Johns and Coopers Mt Pleasant demonstrated a whole range of pasture monitoring and measurement tools at a perennial pasture site.

This included estimating ground cover and food on offer using tools like quadrants and MLA pasture rulers.

Pasture mass, species variability and pasture growth stages were also discussed, along with soil testing, feed testing and budgeting and the use of pasture cages to measure pasture production.

Producers were also able to refresh their skills in taking soil and tissue tests at this session.

Key factors for success

Several factors played a key role in making the Winter Pasture NRM Project and the ongoing BIGG model (managing a ‘stable’ of projects), such a great success.

These include a dedicated facilitator, an active advisory committee providing direction, collaboration from local service providers, informal networking opportunities, clear communication and keeping the focus on productive pastures.

Keeping information clear, practical and targeted to the particular time of the year kept farmers engaged and focused on pastures.





The Keyneton pasture walk was held in August 2012. Participants saw 'before' and 'after' perennial pasture establishment, including increased production and NRM benefits; an annual ryegrass pasture demonstration site; heard about the benefits of lucerne pastures and were given tips on successful establishment.

Even if action plans were not fully implemented, it kept farmers focused on pastures and most managed to maintain an appropriate level of ground cover in the extended dry period in 2012.

"Thrashing around ideas in this setting helped people realise they weren't alone in the issues they were dealing with. They realised they had a whole network of people and information to draw on," said Ms Keynes.

A communication plan was developed for the project which included connections with local and state-based publications and industry bodies.

More than 25 articles were published through these channels. Detailed supporting material was prepared for each pasture walk as well as case studies. Monthly newsletters were also distributed via email to BIGG subscribers.

The project was awarded the 2014 Ag Excellence Alliance Sustainability Award (sponsored by the Department of Environment, Water and Natural Resources (DEWNR)).

In addition, project facilitator Georgie Keynes won the South Australian Westpac Agribusiness Innovative Young Landcare Leader Award in 2013 and went on to represent SA in the National Landcare Awards in 2014.

Where to now?

Not wanting to lose the enthusiasm created during the Winter Pasture NRM Project, the producer groups decided to form the Barossa Improved Grazing Group (BIGG).

BIGG's membership base includes over 200 subscribers and is growing all the time.

The Winter Pasture NRM Project has become an award winning model for collaboration and communication between agricultural industries.

The long term goals of the group is to deliver innovative research and development projects that build sustainable farming systems and resilient rural communities.

BIGG's current projects include:

- Barossa pasture challenge – a recently completed pasture improvement competition between the five local producer groups
- sub-clover and root disease project – examining the effect of root diseases on productivity
- soil moisture and monitoring in grazing systems – to assist decision making
- recovery and management of native pastures after Eden Valley bushfire – improving landholder capacity to re-establish pastures
- grazing in vineyards – studying adoption of this practice and the NRM benefits
- revegetation of watercourses – working with AMLR NRM to demonstrate benefits (funded by Landcare Australia).

"Forming BIGG has ensured we maintain the momentum built up in the winter pastures project, keeping our core group and our links with key industry groups active," said Ms Keynes.



Daniel Schuppan from Landmark demonstrating the Rappa™ temporary electric fencing system at the Moculta grazing workshop, July 2013.

Encouraged by the success of the model, the Koonunga Ag Bureau joined BIGG in 2013, bringing the total number of producer groups to five.

BIGG also linked with the Barossa Young People in Agriculture group.

BIGG's staff numbers have grown with a communication officer appointed as well as a second facilitator.

The initial funding provided for the Winter Pasture NRM Project helped leverage more funding from the board as well as other sources including the Federal Government's Caring for Our Country Program, Landcare Australia, DEWNR's NRM Community Grants and Meat and Livestock Australia's More Beef From Pastures program.

Since 2012 funding has been awarded for 15 individual projects, totalling \$400,000. One example of this is the grant provided by Caring for Our Country to demonstrate improved grazing systems using temporary electric fence systems (Rappa™).

In response to the recent devastating bushfires in the region, collaborations like BIGG help bring people together, to meet immediate needs as well as plan for recovery.

Strategic planning driven by farmers will also be undertaken to ensure the direction and goals of BIGG are clear to ensure the group continues to play a central role in developing and supporting sustainable farming and NRM outcomes in the region.

Sustainable industry support

Sustainable industry partnerships are funded through the Australian Government and managed by the board.

Healthy natural ecosystems and sustainable primary production systems are fundamental to social, environmental and economic well-being.

With more than 50 per cent of the Adelaide and Mount Lofty Ranges region used for primary production, the board will continue to partner with industry to increase sustainability in production systems.

For more information

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