

Livestock producers and researchers – a case study of an effective partnership

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Keywords: sustainable grazing, research, impact, applicability

Introduction The Sustainable Grazing Systems Programme (SGS) ran from 1996-2002 with 11 regional producer committees (Regional Producer Network - Simpson *et al.*, 2003) and 6 research sites (National Experiment – Andrew & Lodge, 2003) distributed throughout the high rainfall zone of temperate Australia. Each regional committee had a core of producers, with invited scientists and extension practitioners and a paid facilitator. The chair was always a producer and rotated annually. Each regional committee conducted a number of paddock-sized demonstrations of improved grazing management practices on a number of farms within the themes; grazing management and weeds, high input systems, innovative grazing methods for production and the SGS adoption process. Each demonstration was on a producer's property assisted by a local management committee with objective data collected by the regional facilitator. The National research sites investigated the effects of grazing management on sustainable livestock production through five themes; water, nutrients, pastures, animals and biodiversity. Producers had a significant input into the design of the National Experiment and each site had a local advisory committee.

The overall aim of the SGS programme was to foster the development and adoption of practices that improved grazing management in the higher rainfall zone of temperate Australia. The programme was spectacularly successful and over 8,000 producers made changes to their management as a result of this programme which they anticipated would yield financial (78%) and sustainability (81%) benefits (Allan *et al.*, 2003).

National Forum 2000 Though local interactions between producers and researchers were occurring, a National Forum in 2000 brought together about 100 producers and regional facilitators from all regions, researchers from all research sites and members of the national steering group, to review progress and plan for the final two years of the programme. The Forum was highly successful in initiating the process of amalgamating information from producer-led farm demonstrations with research results from formal experiments to produce a major impact on farm practices. The Forum was significant for being the first formal attempt at national integration.

Format of the Forum The National Forum was held over three days with a social gathering on the evening preceding the first day. Delegates had previously been assigned to one of 12 mixed (producers, researchers, facilitators) discussion groups each of about eight people. The groups were encouraged to meet and get to know each other on the first evening. Two of the days of the Forum comprised plenary sessions; one led by the producers and the other led by the researchers. To demonstrate and promote equality of input, the format was the same in each case. Each theme was introduced by either a producer or researcher and the main outcomes of either the Regional Producer Network sites or the National Experiment with respect to each theme, were briefly summarised. The mixed groups then discussed the relevance of these outcomes for producers, researchers and more sustainable grazing. The main points were recorded for a Summary Team and also verbally presented to the whole session. At the end of the final session, the Chair of the Summary Team presented the outcomes from the Forum and participants were given a two page summary.

Outcomes The outstanding feature of this forum was the close association of producers and researchers in small groups discussing the outcomes from farm-based demonstrations and formal experiments. Having each group represented at each table meant that every producer and researcher was exposed to the other perspective. It was agreed that producer involvement in research planning is critical and that the whole farm system must be encompassed including its social and personal dimensions. Involvement of producers in assessing the outcomes of each theme of the National Experiment was also deemed essential. This forum resulted in strong and positive interactions and in the words of one producer, "My image of scientists as dull and boring has been destroyed", and one researcher "Real producer involvement with researchers was perhaps the greatest innovation in SGS".

References

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