

The Power of the Farmer Group

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“What’s important to people is to be able to do and be.”

Amartya Sen. Nobel Laureate in Economics

Abstract

Farmer groups have made an important contribution to the prosperity of regional towns across Australia. Broadly speaking, they may be split into two types, those with the specific aim of increasing productivity and those with a broader focus of the welfare of the community as a whole. The Birchip Cropping Group (BCG) regards itself as one of the latter, as is reflected in its mission of “improving profit and viability of Mallee and Wimmera communities.”

The BCG was formed in 1992, the first of the farmer groups in the grains industry to do so. It is currently the largest in number of staff and in the breadth of its projects. There are now more than thirty groups around the country active in taking control of their own destiny. They undertake independent agronomic, economic and community research, provide training and identify future needs.

The agricultural community now accepts the farm group as having a local infrastructure, providing a means of communication and information exchange, and acting as a co-operative research partner and a pathway into the future for innovation and change. The members of different groups know of and mix with each other, share ideas and expertise, produce joint publications. They have developed a network that stimulates interest across Australia and has influence.

Farmer agronomic needs and interests have a significant profile as a result.

Much discussion has occurred about the sustainability of farm groups: whether they will maintain the current level of their impact on the way farmers obtain access to information, how the priorities of public sector research and extension could change and whether farmer groups will become the intermediary between funding bodies and public sector researchers.

Important ingredients of the sustainable success of farm groups include the presence of strong leadership, boundless energy and community support, encouragement of innovation and change, access to broad-based expertise and financial resources, and a commitment to clear achievable goals.

The financial viability of farm groups has been thus far derived largely from the support of the Grains Research and Development Corporation (GRDC), which has been the major investor since their inception. The prospect of their becoming economically self sufficient in the future is not high unless radical changes occur in the work undertaken and interests pursued.

Probably the greatest impact of farm groups has been to focus the efforts of researchers, industry and farmers in one direction, which has led to exchange of ideas, co-operation in solving problems and effective dissemination of new information and innovations.

Media summary

Farmer groups, such as the Birchip Cropping Group in Australia, act as a co-operative research partner and a pathway into the future for innovation and change in rural communities.

Key words

Farmer group, communication, research and development, problem solving

Introduction

Much is written and spoken about the value of the individual, the intrinsic worth of what he or she has to say and think, and the necessity of being oneself. Equally, however, it is true that each individual, in isolation and without support, is often disinclined or lacks the confidence and the impetus to act.

Farmers are, by definition, isolated one from the other. They work their ground, tend their animals and have in the past operated almost by instinct and on the basis of information handed down from generation to generation. There has existed an innate reluctance to share information, to divulge failures and to admit to successes. (Note the verbs: in the country, success is something to which one “admits”: such is the degree of false modesty expected by one’s neighbours).

The BCG seeks to provide individual farmers with the means to communicate – with each other, with researchers, with government, with industry and with consultants. It urges farmers to determine their own destiny, find their own solutions, and make things happen.

It provides information, a forum for discussion and the opportunity for interchange of ideas – not those that are “tried and true,” but those at the forefront of agricultural thinking in Australia and, indeed, the world.

In isolation, most farmers would not be inclined, or able, to access such information. As part of a community of agriculturalists, they are able to do so.

This is the Power of the Group.

The Birchip Cropping Group (BCG) was formed when a group of farmers who had come to know and trust each other decided to do something for themselves and for their small community, which they perceived as being in decline. The success of their initial activities created a momentum, which grew to a point at which a cultural change in the way information was delivered and received was achieved, and in the way successes and failures were shared. The desire for new information and technologies grew and a melting pot of ideas and opinions was created.

The BCG became a focus for the research of a whole range of outside co-operators. This occurred because there existed an enthusiastic, welcoming, interested farming community which wanted to help, was hungry for new, applicable, relevant information and was always prepared to share its knowledge with others. Importantly, in return, researchers became aware of farmers’ problems, were able to understand their priorities and as a result to re-focus their research and delivery.

In the beginning, the BCG created its own unit, which undertook mainly applied farmer research. In the first few years, its work centred on chemical rates and tolerances, new crops, on sowing rates, dates and row spacing and on the many fertilizer combinations. Over the years, this work has become more sophisticated and the hundreds of trials and demonstrations now focus on matters such as fungicides, resistant weeds, agronomic packages, economic analysis, comparisons of farming systems, soil characterisation, crop modelling and linking production with the environment.

As was initially the case, farmers are still surveyed to discover what work needs to be done in order for them to make better decisions. The BCG prides itself on its mix of deference to practical farmer demand, awareness of the next generation of agricultural opportunities and a passion to embrace blue sky dreams.

Group members like to think of themselves as community agricultural innovators.

Most of the BCG work is traditional replicated trial work done on its own or in collaboration with our co-operators. However, it is important to note that some of the work done by the BCG is demonstration only: the trials are not based on “scientific” replication. Typical examples include farmer paddock demonstrations focused on varieties and chemical practices. Ideas need to be shown: they may be discussed and adopted by those most interested. Reiterated ‘proof’ is not necessary. Farmers are encouraged to walk into the sites, remove plants, dig holes and generally mess up. Sometimes demonstrations can offer ideas that need further work to verify.

The trial work constitutes only half the effort required: equal energy is spent delivering the information to as many farmers and interested personnel as possible. The old adage “the more you give the more you receive” has been gratifyingly demonstrated at Birchip. As more information is given away, and sometimes forced on to farmers, the more money and support is given to the group by sponsors and funding bodies to give more information away ... a simple formula for success.

At a practical level, gimmicks and marketing techniques are used to entice and attract both the converted and the sceptical to the many activities run throughout the year. Once the audience is there, it has been our policy from the very start to deliver our information in a professional and palatable form. Our information has to compete with work, sport, social activities, family matters and farmers’ natural apathy. In order to attract farmers’ attention, activities must be seen to be fun, to be well run, and to have outcomes that can be clearly directed to the benefit of farms, the environment, the community and the general lifestyle.

One of the many benefits of farmer groups lies in the variety of information emanating from a diverse range of people. The fortnightly BCG fax bulletin disseminates the knowledge of consultants, researchers, industry and farmers, interrelating and contributing to the timely information about important agronomic happenings in the region and about what should be done on members’ farms tomorrow.

Essential to the success of the group is the mutual respect and perceived importance of all the players. Everyone understands the other’s part in the supply chain of information and interpretation. The blend of experience and theory reaches a balance. Ideas and feedback work in both directions. In this two-way exchange, researchers are able to see the practical relevance of their work and farmers learn to appreciate projects that previously may have been dismissed as ‘airy fairy’, academic irrelevancies. Farm groups like the BCG have an important role to play in providing specific information for a region. For many, it is the link between the broader agricultural community and their own enterprises. Information is not necessarily farm specific: recommendations to individual farmers are not at this stage given. Nor is the information relevant nationally; every region has its own problems and challenges. Consultants need not fear for their jobs, nor researchers for the survival of their projects. Each has its place.

The farm group is the perfect platform or launching pad for ideas and new technologies. Its activities provide a great stage for experts to stand up and be heard, considered and appreciated. Agriculture, like sport, has its heroes, elder statesmen and favourites who have won their place because of their work, ability to speak and their relevance to farmers’ profitability. Their contributions can be a positive way of attracting new people into the industry and giving all participants the impetus to try a little harder.

One of the modern demands of government and funding bodies is the attention to attribution of credit for advances in agriculture. Naturally, as a result, all the players are keen to receive due recognition. Some organisations are prepared even to sacrifice some of their good will in order to gain the necessary credit to qualify them as beneficiaries of future funding arrangements. Although accountability is necessary and desirable, so too is spreading the credit over all the participants who together contribute to progress.

The BCG is grateful for the help of the many people who have contributed to the plethora of ideas and recommendations that have emerged over the last twelve years and recognizes that they have been indispensable. However, in many instances, recognizing the validity of the total package is more important than rewarding the individual who may have been responsible for its creation.

The BCG has played a unique role in research and extension in the Mallee and Wimmera region.

What sets the BCG apart from other organisations?

- No other organization has succeeded in drawing together – or perhaps has even tried – the range of agricultural and agri-business players engaged in providing answers to farmers’ questions and supporting them in their ambitions. All levels in the industry are involved.
- Independent and unbiased information given by farmers for farmers without any strings attached is accepted enthusiastically.

- The BCG primary focus is on practical agronomy, on what works and on what is profitable in the paddock. It addresses real problems and issues in a way that farmers can deal with.
- Much of the learning is done in the paddock. Diagnostic schools in spraying technologies and fungicides are examples.
- New communication tools are tried and experimented with. All learning styles are catered for.
- Indicators and guidelines for environmental sustainability are continually sought; the group is conscious of the role that the environment plays in community lifestyle, market opportunities and production maximisation.
- The imperative of growing better crops through the application of detailed knowledge is the constant focus of the group, as exemplified by APSIM and Yield Prophet.

Major agronomic achievements of the BCG over the past twelve years have been in the following areas.

- **Competitive Crops.** The manipulation of sowing rates and dates, row spacing and plant nutrition that improve plant vigour has resulted in crops competing with weeds producing higher yields with better quality specifications.
- **Herbicides.** Work on herbicide crop tolerances, spray technology systems, herbicide rates and uses and chemical group rotations.
- **New crops and varieties.** Introduction and development of agronomic packages for new crops like canola and lentils and new varieties of conventional crops
- **Soils.** Identifying and understanding different soil types and water dynamics The BCG was able to play a major part in making sub-soil limitations a focus for national research. Considerable changes in agronomic practice has resulted
- **Nutrition.** Exhaustive and detailed work on fertilizer application rates, types, timing of application and placement, to find the most economic and risk averse use of fertilizers, especially phosphorous and nitrogen
- **Chemical Resistance.** Developing strategies that prevent or reduce herbicide resistance by changing farm practice and rotations. Included is the role of sheep in the resistance cycle.
- **Farming systems.** A long-term trial comparing four farming systems or philosophies. The aim is to compare each system against a number of sustainable indicators that help farmers make fundamental decisions on their own farm.

The Future

The saying “The more you know the more you want to know “has real relevance for the future. In some cases the questions are the same but the answers are different. A great many new ideas and areas of research have to be under taken and the BCG believes that the following new research and extension areas are priorities for the future.

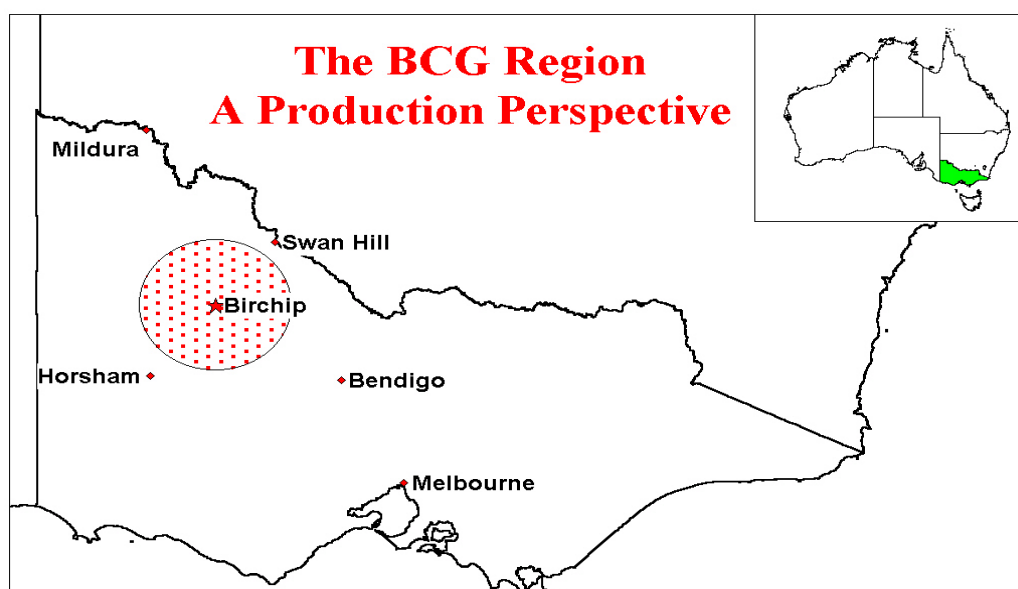
- **Precision Agriculture.** This work will involve making variable rate technology work profitability. The practical adoption of GPS guidance systems and use of inter-row management systems will be central issues
- **New Crops.** The one silver bullet that can have the biggest impact on farm profitability in the future is new varieties. With the help of gene technology the possibilities are endless. Whatever happens at the development end, groups like BCG will be important players in the road testing and acceptance of any new crops and varieties.
- **Making Conservation Pay.** This is an important and growing area of research. The opportunity of securing safe food status in the market place, of preventing and solving the environmental problems of a catchment and building a place where communities want to live and enjoy their surroundings make conservation a profitable proposition of the future.
- **Livestock systems.** The humble sheep still has for many a place in the farming system. Recent years have seen an increase in the importance of meat at the expense of wool. Central to the profitability of sheep is the stocking rate and the nutrition of the animal. Grazing and supplementary feeding practices still need considerable work.
- **Best Management Systems.** Understanding how all the single issues of farming fit together to allow best management decisions to be made. Being able to integrate sustainability and profit with continual improvement. Increasing knowledge and understanding of how things work and developing new farm management skills will continue to be core tasks of the BCG.

- Commercial Services Arm. The need for independent skilled advice has created an opportunity for the formation of a commercial arm, which offers commercial services to individual farmers. Added to this, the franchise rights to commercialise the APSIM production model to farmers across Australia will be an exciting extension to the BCG core business.
- Sustainable communities. Fundamental to the viability of the region is the capacity to maintain and build a vibrant, educated, happy, prosperous community that offers opportunities of work and pleasure for everyone. The BCG will look at any opportunity that fulfils these aims.

What, exactly, is BCG?

The Birchip Cropping Group (BCG) is a not-for-profit agricultural research and extension group run by farmers from the Mallee-Wimmera region in Victoria. The group was formed in 1992 to improve the farm incomes of its membership and of the farming community, to bolster broader community vitality and provide practical solutions to farm production constraints. This is reflected in the mission statement for the BCG: "To improve the profitability and long-term viability of Mallee and Wimmera communities through research, demonstration and exchange of ideas amongst farmers and industry groups."

The Region



Birchip is located in north western Victoria and is in the centre of Victoria's grain growing area. Within 100 km of Birchip, 50% of the state's grains are grown, with a value of about \$700 million annually. The region is in a typical temperate rainfall climate zone: all crops are grown during the winter-spring period. Growing season rainfall (April – October) varies from 220mm in the north to 370mm in the south. Wheat and barley is grown across the region and, as rainfall increases, canola, lentils, chickpeas, field peas, faba beans and oaten hay are included in the rotation. Grazing of sheep for wool and fat lambs is also a major industry of the region.

Soils vary from Mallee sands to Wimmera self mulching grey clays. The major soil constraints are sodicity, inherent salinity and boron toxicity in the subsoils of much of the area.

How did the BCG start?

The BCG was initially formed during a Farm Management 500 (FM 500) tour undertaken by Birchip district farmers to the Hart Field Day in south Australia in 1992. Based on a perception of isolation from relevant research stations and inadequate servicing by existing extension organisations, about a dozen Birchip farmers decided to form a group and start their own demonstration trial site. Start-up funds totalling \$50,000 were raised to get the group off the ground, sourced as sponsorship from corporate organisations. In 1994, the Grains Research and Development Corporation (GRDC) provided support funding for the group to undertake crop production research. Project funding, sponsorship and membership have since grown to such an extent that the group now has a budget in excess of \$1.4million.

Key Objectives

The aim of the group is to improve the profitability and viability of all farmers in the Mallee and Wimmera, resulting in successful businesses and industries which contribute to developing prosperous towns, pride in the region and a commitment to furthering the community good. The communities of the Mallee and Wimmera regions of Australia are the primary beneficiaries of the work of the BCG. The BCG has as its core reason for being the social and economic sustainability of regional communities. This has been achieved through research and development that brought improved profitability to the individual farm, and as a direct effect increased employment and social cohesion within the community. In recent times, there has been an added emphasis outside of its traditional agronomic sphere on collaborating with organisations whose core values are focused on environmental sustainability. The cornerstone of the BCG work is equal exchange of ideas between industry, farmers and researchers and the sharing of success and failures by the farming community, with the aim of helping to solve the many practical problems experienced.

How is the BCG Farmer Driven?

Structure

Unlike other farm groups the BCG has evolved to a board structure with a CEO. This has come about because of the number of staff employed, the amount of work undertaken by the group and the expertise involved in running the organisation.

- The board comprises seven members and meets on a monthly basis. The board is intimately involved with BCG research and development, as well as its day-to-day management. When key staff members leave, more often than not board members are able to carry out the key functions of BCG management and communication.
- A general committee composed of farmers, industry and government representatives, which meets six times per year advises the board on key issues. 18 farmer committee positions are voted in each year with 50% of the Committee required to reside more than 50km from Birchip.
- There are five sub committees: Trials, Sponsorship and Marketing, Livestock, Youth and Finance. Sub committees are also formed for new projects and special events.
- Recognising that today quickly becomes tomorrow, a 'Blue Sky Mining' Advisory Committee was established. This Committee acts as the formal 'research committee' required for Registered Research Agency Status. Membership includes innovative and creative thinkers with a passion for the region and for communities. These members have had experience on National RDC Boards and international research organisations – or are recognised as 'outside the square' thinkers in their community. They meet once each year to dream up new or re-born research questions and extension strategies. This Committee was responsible for the birth of the Farming Systems Project, which investigates the impact of four different farming systems on economic and environmental sustainability.
- In 2002 the BCG formed an alliance with Wimmera Farming Systems (WFS) a smaller satellite group in the region. This alliance has seen the two groups combine to undertake joint and mutually beneficial research and development, to be run by one central administrative body and to enjoy greater opportunities with increased membership and geographic coverage. WFS continues to direct the research and trials undertaken in the Wimmera, ensuring local ownership and input to the work. With the great proliferation of farming system groups, this alliance was seen as an opportunity to reduce duplication and build a stronger local base.

Member involvement

Membership to the group costs \$230 (+GST) per year for a family, and there are currently over 500 family memberships. All members and industry partners have input into the identification and selection of research work undertaken by the BCG. An annual members' survey is sent out at the end of harvest (December) with questions aimed at identifying the critical factors affecting farm production, finances and lifestyle for that year. A second survey is then sent out to all members and industry partners in February to identify potential research trials and longer-term projects for the coming season. These are collated and refined by the Trials Sub Committee.

Staff

The group now employs fourteen full time staff, two part-time staff, and two consultants and assistants. Staff coordinate trials and research, manage memberships and sponsors, carry out economic analysis of farming systems, organise expos and field days and produce bulletins, manuals, scientific literature and industry updates. They are assisted by agronomic consultants who provide technical advice and by seasonal staff. The Victorian Department of Primary Industries (DPI) stations one officer at Birchip who spends a proportion of his time working directly on BCG/DPI joint projects.

Infrastructure

Originally office premises were rented in Birchip. In 2002, the group moved into a new \$800,000 research facility. This building is testament to the commitment of the BCG Committee and to its strength and growth over the last ten years. The facility houses staff from DPI, DSE, Landcare, the Catchment Management Authority, the University of Melbourne and BCG. It has lifted pride within the membership of what has been achieved and has added an extra dimension of professionalism to work undertaken. Ownership of plant and equipment has ensured that the BCG can operate independently and carry out operations at the required time, which has resulted in higher quality trial results and more timely communication.

What are the BCG activities?

The many activities of the BCG attracted over 3000 visitors in a four-month period during 2003. As the mission states, the group should benefit the whole Wimmera Mallee community. Information is not only widely available but also passionately promoted for the advantage of all. While members receive the full research results in February, all farmers in the region receive a selection of the best results free of charge in March/April, sent out through the Ground Cover magazine with support from Grains Research and Development Corporation (GRDC).

Events are open to everyone and research results are widely distributed. Some BCG activities target specific interest groups: women, students, and young farmers. BCG sees its role as catering for all members of the community.

Ongoing BCG activities include:

Adaptive, collaborative research

- Five agronomic trial sites; a long-term farming systems site monitoring economic and environmental indicators of four farming systems; a long term resistant ryegrass research site; an alley farming demonstration site; a greenhouse emission research project; a project investigating social acceptance of trade offs, biophysical parameters and measurement of biodiversity function; and adaptive research and development of the APSIM model with APSRU Toowoomba;

Information dissemination

- 3500 people visit BCG annually to attend events such as one of the seven field days; young farmer seminars; annual Grains Research Expo; and Diagnostic Field Schools.
- The 'Mallee and Wimmera Crop and Pasture Production Manual' is published and distributed to 6000 farmers. It contains results of all trial work, reference material and farmer experiences during the previous season.
- Electronic communication occurs across an internet web site - www.bcg.org.au; and through the Virtual Field Day program.

Servicing membership

- Members can access an annual information update each February; as well as regular seminars and workshops; a bi-monthly newsletter; fortnightly fax bulletins covering topical issues relating to the growing season; a seasonal fax on predicted yields for various crops given field conditions; numerous small on-farm trials and demonstrations; and a members-only field day.

Contract training

- BCG provides training courses for the grains industry: participants include tertiary students, government and private agronomists, and staff of the many corporate supporters of the BCG. BCG also supports international training projects, hosting a series of final year French and Canadian agriculture students thus providing benefits to staff and the community as well as building the BCG identity overseas.

Learning From Our Experiences

BCG has evolved, and is continually evolving, as have other farming system groups, in Australia (Collinson, 2003). BCG began as a demonstration group with several sites known as the 'Birchip Cropping Demonstration Sites'. The Group operated under the auspices of the local Landcare Group prior to incorporating in its own right. At this time communications to farmers were of the 'end' result only, rather than involving growers in the learning along the way: in essence technology transfer. With increased interest and confidence developed through the 'demonstrations', BCG grew to involve farmers in learning research outcomes. Farmers were involved in staged failure research and in the development of research and communications for their own locality, factors identified by Röling and Wagemakers (1998) as important for 'social learning' as outlined by King (2003). This concept may be used to describe the BCG approach.

Farmer involvement in the full circle of research and extension has increased the adoption of new technologies, practices and thinking, which has in turn led to on-farm change. Farmers' awareness and knowledge has increased, and with this has come greater flexibility and confidence. The committee members of the BCG act as a litmus paper, testing the reaction to something new. Without them BCG would be just another R&D group. It is therefore crucial to maintain active involvement at the committee level.

Initially, the committee members played an important hands-on role in the BCG. This was effective while the group was relatively small, with strong farmer ownership and involvement. However, as the BCG has grown, the sheer amount of work and the complexity of legal and financial accountability have made it increasingly difficult for farmer members to play as central a role in operational management. Conversely, farmers from a wider geographic area have become involved in the executive committee and all members have changed their roles to contribute more to strategic planning.

Another tactic employed by BCG is to keep the Board and the Committee involved with something new each year. As new events, activities, and projects are evolved many are implemented and trialled with the Committee. This serves a dual purpose of maintaining their interest and test-driving the idea. This works well when the idea can be tested by most of the Committee and when new ideas are stimulated.

Succession planning is an on-going concern. To combat this BCG implemented a system to attract active committee members from a wide geographic area. The 18 committee members are headhunted. However we try not to target those already highly committed in local organisations. As the BCG Chairman, I have made a conscious decision to focus my efforts on the BCG. A small number of younger people are introduced to the committee each year. However we recognise that younger people are often preoccupied with their own properties or careers, and that when people reach their 40s, they tend to become more community orientated. Therefore, while BCG introduces younger people to the group and leadership roles, more is expected of older members of the committee.

Succession planning of the staff team is also critical to BCG's on-going momentum. The enthusiasm of BCG staff has never been questioned. The flexibility provided by BCG fosters innovation and self-expression, and key qualities and interest areas of staff have influenced strategic directions in research and communication. Crucial to the long-term success of the BCG has been the involvement of one key technical consultant combined with many younger professionals, who use BCG as a 'laboratory' in which they develop their own skills. The cyclical loss of staff, combined with a farmer practicality, has resulted in the evolution of an unofficial mentoring system. New staff are 'unofficially' mentored by local farmers and committee members, who provide historical and local background to issues and events, ensure a sound understanding of the local community and act as a 'friend' for the newcomer. BCG has yet to find the solution to keeping trained and experienced staff for long periods of time, apart from supplying eligible partners (a tactic I openly support!)

Financial support from the commercial partners has been pivotal to the success of the BCG. While traditional research investors have supported specific projects, commercial partner funds and membership dollars have been 'available' to spend in any area of BCG business. This 'unallocated' money has allowed BCG to chase pipe dreams and has paid for time to be spent developing projects and initiatives. The importance of having flexible funds uncommitted to a particular outcome cannot be understated.

Collaboration

The BCG has been the facilitator of many associated projects conducted by a range of groups in the Birchip region. Without the BCG their presence in the region would be greatly reduced and many situations simply not exist.

Research collaborators and investors include the GRDC, the Victorian Department of Primary Industries (DPI), Grain Growers Association, Victorian State Greenhouse Unit, CSIRO, APSRU, the Centre for Legumes in Mediterranean Agriculture (CLIMA), several cooperative research centres (CRCs) and Universities, Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation (RIRDC), Catchment Management Authorities (CMAs), Natural Heritage Trust, major industry groups such as fertiliser and chemical companies, the South Australian Research and Development Institute (SARDI), Farm Management 500, Primary Industries and Resources South Australia (PIRSA) and Agriculture WA.

The relationship with DPI in Victoria is especially productive in that we now have many joint projects dealing with topics such as sub-soil limitations to production and the herbicide tolerance of different pulse crops.

Maintaining the Momentum

BCG achievements are both tangible and intangible. Agronomic advances such as new crops, rotations, management applications have been made. Understanding of the systems has increased, with knowledge of subsoil limitations, machinery use, climate impact. Extension of information has taken many forms: fax outs, manuals, field schools, expos, field days, websites and virtual field days.

A large amount of research and investigation occurs in the region, fostering the development of inquisitive and questioning minds within our farming community and industry. Visitors come to the region for events and to undertake research, bringing outside money to the towns, using local services and creating links with other regions and towns. A strong group of young people have returned, and are continuing to return, to the region to farm or be involved in the industry. This is evidenced by the number of young professionals working with BCG and by the young farmers involved in various aspects of BCG projects and events.

Participation, communication and leadership are some of the success factors for farming system approaches (Lawrence et al 2001) that BCG is attempting to maintain. Scientific leadership has also been identified as critical to maintaining the right mode in which to learn. Scientific consultants are engaged to complement the young staff team in order to combine scientific knowledge and experience with youth and enthusiasm.

The BCG has always encouraged young people to return to rural communities. In achieving this alone, many believe that the BCG has justified its existence. In a town of 800, the fourteen young staff has created its own momentum and has become a centre for young people with the obvious economic, social and community benefits.

BCG strives to find the most effective formula for meetings in order to encourage participation in the more 'formal' communication forums. In the early years, when farmer owned research and extension was relatively new to the region, BCG committee meetings would attract 30-40 people. We now struggle to achieve this. We have tried different formats, different times and have had some success with a key speaker. A key speaker brings a potential personal benefit to the individual committee member, who is volunteering his or her time generally for the greater good.

BCG has a philosophy of billeting visitors at farmers' homes. This has multiple benefits. It encourages more learning and understanding of individual perspectives; keeps things enjoyable and social; challenges people and develops relationships. Billeting is easier in the Birchip area as opposed to other rural areas eg. the Liebe Group area of WA, as there are a greater number of families due to smaller farm size. Ridley (2003) identifies the wider community and local government as not playing a major role in farming system work. In our case, BCG engages families living in Birchip in visitor billets and actively involves them and the Buloke Shire in social events.

Relationships have been developed with the Institute of Land and Food Resources, University of Melbourne, Longerenong Campus, La Trobe University, Dookie College and the Joint Centre for Crop Improvement. These relationships revolve around students in rural industry wanting to undertake projects in the Wimmera-Mallee. BCG is also a partner in training PhD students.

Future Directions in Sustainability

Perhaps the biggest issue for BCG is social, rather than economic or environmental, sustainability. Arresting population decline and the resultant imperative to preserve the viability of the many small communities are the greatest challenges

Radical-thinking, creative and gregarious people are welcomed to BCG. Employment opportunities bring young people and new faces to town. Progressive farming systems encourage the young back to farms and hence back into rural communities. Links with other regions and organisations ensure that outsiders inject new perspectives and ideas into the engine room of the BCG and community.

BCG has grown from a group of farmers in search of specific agronomic and chemical information, delivered locally and in a digestible and relevant form to an organisation with contractual obligations, human resource management demands and financial accountability issues. A major concern of the BCG leadership is the balance between optimising creativity and enthusiasm (outward looking) and time spent on structure and process (inward looking).

BCG finds itself collaborating on research in all sectors of sustainability, working with an array of organisations and stakeholders, and balancing the development and delivery of information that will support the system now with information that will support its existence in the future.

Farming systems groups have been criticised for duplicating research work already undertaken by research institutes with an explicit mandate to deliver such research (Carberry, 2001). BCG does not believe it duplicates such work. Rather it enhances the work undertaken by research institutes, enabling it to achieve success at the broader scale of rural community development.

BCG is progressing from 'traditional' small plot demonstrations and experiments, to replicated research trials, on-farm trials, and community projects such as a regional revegetation project and a project that follows the links between production and conservation. These projects are more complex, involving more stakeholders and incorporating multiple perspectives.

BCG facilitates the incorporation of environmental principles of sustainability into profitable and productive farms and communities. The grain belt of Victoria, with its extensively cleared landscape and highly depleted indigenous biodiversity, has not been known for its proactive approach to environmental sustainability. BCG is striving to change this. BCG is not only doing this to feel 'good': it sees potential new market opportunities for food and fibre produced sustainably. Greenhouse, alley farming, and the integration of conservation at a farm and catchment scale are all BCG projects. This has been exemplified in recent collaborations with a number of Catchment Management Authorities (including Mallee and North Central) exploring the relationship between farming system change and regional natural resource management (NRM) objectives and targets. The focus on regional NRM delivery fostered by Commonwealth and State governments will succeed only if local farming communities and organisations such as the BCG exert a "grass roots" influence in its favour.

Why has BCG become involved with such stakeholders? A number of factors have supported this change. Firstly, BCG has been undertaking locally relevant research for eleven years. Many of the 'easy' wins have been made, and new research is asking increasingly complex questions that require a more integrated and all-encompassing approach. The key drivers of the BCG, our farmer committee members, have promoted this area of investigation and want to 'know' more about the entire local system, not just the agronomic. Secondly, funding opportunities have presented themselves in these areas – and for a 'not-for-profit' community group, funding is fairly important! Thirdly, key individuals in both BCG and the collaborating organisations have seen the potential benefits of working together in non-traditional sectors.

BCG is continuing to evolve, a difficult process at times, in order to deal with the increasingly complex issues and to contribute effectively to future directions. This evolution will occur both in response to outside influences and demands, and in the desire to initiate change, the ultimate objective being the social, environmental and economic sustainability of our rural communities.

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