



FINAL REPORT 2013/2014

Part 1 - Summary Details

Please use your TAB key to complete Parts 1 & 2.

CRDC Project Number: CGA1210

Project Title: Network Development Officer

Project Commencement Date: 1st Oct 2012 **Project Completion Date:** 30th June 2013

Part 2 – Contact Details

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Part 3 – Final Report

(The points below are to be used as a guideline when completing your final report.)

Background Information

1. Outline the background to the project.

The concept of the Network Development Officer (NCO) role came about following an Upper Namoi CGA bus trip around 2 1/2 years ago, which identified the need for better research information flow to growers, and the sharing of information regarding the growing of cotton and grains between the more and less experienced growers of each crop. Through grass roots grants funding to the UNCGA and contributions by AgVance Farming, the role was formed in a trial capacity with a partnership between the two groups in April 2012.

The original funding for the role took the NDO position until the end of September 2012. Following the success of the role in the first 6 months, a PRP (extending from June 2013 onwards) was lodged. The funding relevant to this report bridged the gap between these two projects – allowing the NDO role to continue.

Objectives

2. List the project objectives (from the application) and the extent to which these have been achieved.

The project objectives were:

- Increase interaction between cotton growers, thus facilitating an increased information sharing and up-skilling of cotton growers.
- Increase the interaction between AgVance Farming and UNCGA, thus facilitating the up-skilling of UNCGA members in the growing of grains and pulses and the up-skilling of AgVance members in the growing of cotton.
- To build on the already significant number of new cotton growers in the region through the information sharing activities and the networking with existing cotton growers.
- To value add to research undertaken at Myall Vale, ground truthing research results in a local context and promulgating the findings to growers.
- To increase the overall farm productivity of all growers through the use of crop rotations plus regular objective analysis and comparison of operations.

Methods

3. Detail the methodology and justify the methodology used. Include any discoveries in methods that may benefit other related projects.

Methodologies used to meet the above objectives included:

- **Post Winter Crop Meeting**
 - Growers were surveyed as to their farm productivity and inputs – eg. yields, fertiliser use, varietal choice, rotational successes and failures, gross returns etc.
 - Data was presented at the meeting and the NDO facilitated discussion around the results. Growers learnt from growers.
 - Agronomists and consultants were also invited along, who had valuable technical input into the discussion. This also exposed growers to a variety of agronomic thinking – as they hear the different approaches of different consultants – an opportunity which is rarely available.

The post crop meetings continue to be well attended, which is a testament to their success. Other groups/rural merchandisers do have post crop meetings, but they tend to be presented as lecture style.

They are considered a valuable information sharing tool – and ***suggest them as a tool for other projects where appropriate.***

Geoff Hunter, RDO with the Lower Namoi attended a recent Post Crop meeting and is now planning a similar style meeting for that area.

- **Weekly Newsletter**
 - The weekly newsletter keeps growers abreast of meetings (both organised by the NDO and industry meetings), at which they can mix with other growers and learn recent farming advancements.
 - The newsletter also extends recent and relevant research information to growers.
 - The NDO reports in the newsletter, of innovative, different practices that growers in the Upper Namoi are practicing. This further facilitates the

information sharing amongst growers and enhances the 'network' – as growers know who they can turn to for experienced advice on particular issues.

- **Ground Truthing Trials**
 - Last summer the NDO undertook **flower tagging trials** in 3 areas of the Upper Namoi, to demonstrate crop cutout times relevant to the CottASSIST last effective flower tool. The results of this will be extended to the group via the newsletter.
 - Initial planning for optimal nitrogen use trial in cotton for this coming summer, linking with the CRDC's trials across all valleys.

- **Field days**
 - Researchers Field Day – connecting cotton researchers with growers
 - UNCGA Crop Competition Field Day/Tour – Giving growers access to top cotton grower's properties to learn from them.
 - Summer Grains Tour with Researchers – linking growers and researchers.
 - Irrigation Scheduling under Lateral Move – upskilling growers by learning from the leaders in this field – both advisors/DPI specialists and other growers.
 - As other agricultural advancements occur, occasional field days are held to extend to growers the new information/ techniques. There has been two of these during the time of the funding:
 - “Getting the Most from Your Precision Planter”. (This field day idea was then picked up by other RDO's and rolled out in their valleys –ie. Macquarie, Lower Namoi, etc; consequently spreading the word even further.
 - BioActive Emissions Technology

- **Think Tanks**
 - Organised two Think Tanks to allow Guy Roth to speak to growers and get their feedback on what areas of cotton production need researching/extending.

The above varying techniques are used to cover a cross section of extension means which will help to appeal to all growers at some stage – field days, indoor meetings, newsletters, think tanks, trials. Less extroverted growers may not be so comfortable in a field day environment – so the newsletter helps to communicate with them. The NDO's personal experience from speaking to several growers who rarely attend field days –is that they regularly read the newsletter.

Some growers like to learn via seeing the scientific data, while others like to learn from fellow growers. Both methods of learning are addressed through the above mentioned methodologies.

Outcomes

4. Describe how the project's outputs will contribute to the planned outcomes identified in the project application. Describe the planned outcomes achieved to date.

The mentioned outputs (as mentioned in methodology), all increase grower interaction and upskilling, which is evidenced by practice change of the growers – see appendix 1.

Interaction between AgVance Farming and UNCGA occurs through the meetings and field days – again evidenced by practice change (appendix 1) – the learning of which happens with information sharing across groups – ie. Newer cotton growers (generally AgVance members) to more experienced cotton growers (generally UNCGA members). Also, grain information moves back the other direction eg. Andrew Watson’s (UNCGA) nitrogen management in wheat, which he changed after comments by Angus Murchison (AgVance) – see appendix 1.

There will be a number of first time cotton growers in the Upper Namoi this coming year – (meeting another objective of the funding) including:

James Hockey

Windy Station

Phil Warmoll – back in after 10 years.

Geoff Barwick (demonstration plot)*

James Arnott (demonstration plot)*

*Both demonstration plots are at the very southern end of the Liverpool Plains near Willow Tree– ie. Stretching the boundary of what is ‘accepted’ cotton growing country, which may demonstrate to others in the area that it is a viable crop option.

Myall Vale research has/will be ground truthed through several projects (Flower tagging and cutout and Nitrogen rate optimisation in cotton).

Increased farm productivity is likely a slower thing to measure as practice change occurs and then rolls out into productivity outcomes. There are however already examples of increased productivity, with nitrogen rates in cotton being cut back by a number of growers – while maintaining or increasing yield. Rod Grant’s irrigation management improvements have helped to increase his farm average yield for cotton from just over 6 ba/ha to around 9ba/ha – as per post summer crop meeting data. Comments to this effect were made by Rod at a recent meeting.

The outputs from the project (as per methodology), have allowed the planned outcomes to be met. Any grower that has been involved in a post crop meeting will be testament to the great interaction at these meetings. Growers may be contacted to attest to the interaction created through these meetings and other field days. Growers such as David Ronald, Ian Carter, Andrew Watson, John Hamparsum, Hugh Price, Andrew Pursehouse are some of the regular attendees at meetings and can be contacted to discuss how the NDO role is meeting the objectives of the funding.

5. Please report on any:-

a) Feedback forms used and what the results were

Regular feedback forms have not been used throughout the period of funding, however there was a general evaluation form after the Precision Planting field day. The following questions were asked:

Q – Please comment on today’s field day.

A -100% of respondents had positive feedback about the day, with comments like “excellent field day, fully supported by lots of growers”. “It made it clearly evident I need to increase planting accuracy”

Q - What are your expectations of the NDO role? (This was asked to identify expectations of the role and to check that what growers perceived of the NDO role is in line with the objectives of the funding).

A - 100% of respondents had a good understanding of the role (which will help in making sure their expectations are met).

Q - Are these expectations of the NDO being met?

A - 100% of respondents answered that their expectations were being met.

b) The highlights for participants or key learnings achieved

Key learnings and highlights for the project can be demonstrated through grower’s practice change as a result of information learnt through the NDO role, please see appendix 1.

c) The number of people participating and any comments on level of participation

Date	Function	No Attending
1 st October 2012	Researchers Field Day	13 researchers Around 25 other
18 th Dec 2012	‘Irrigation Scheduling Under Lateral Move & Centre Pivot Irrigation Systems’	22
8 th March 2013	Visual presentation to all at UNCGA Crop Competition Presentation Dinner of what each entrant did (production wise) with their entered crop.	85
13 th March	UNCGA Cotton Tour/Field Day (follow up from Crop Competition).	46
21 st March 2013	Winter Crop Post Mortem	33
11 th April 2013	Think Tank – Breeza	16
17 th April 2013	Summer Crop Grains Tour with Researchers	32
20 th June 2013	Think Tank – Harparary	14
27 th May 2013	Impromptu (last minute opportunity) Mini Field Day – BioActive Emissions Technology	9

Comments on participation

- With a thirst for knowledge, the newer cotton growers are more likely to *regularly* attend cotton related meetings/field days (cf. with long time growers), but it’s really about hitting on a topic that appeals (ie. Precision planter upgrades) and good numbers will attend. The innovators/leaders will also regularly attend.

- The AgVance members are historically good attendees at meetings in their area. The NDO believes this is attributable to them having experienced the 'network' for some years and hence valuing its advantages. This is most relevant to post crop meetings, where personal information about production figures and profitability is shared. Some UNCGA growers have attended these meetings and it is anticipated that with time, other growers will build confidence enough to share such information.
- With an area from Boggabri/Baan Baa to Willow Tree – to hold one meeting for this area and expect that growers will travel such distances seems to be a little too optimistic. This may require several meetings on one topic – which was done with the Precision Planter field day- with a second meeting held further north in the area that overlaps with the Lower Namoi (with RDO Geoff Hunter).
- The newsletter is distributed to all UNCGA members, associate members, AgVance members and sponsors – encompassing some 90 people.

Budget

6. Describe how the project's budget was spent in comparison with the application budget. Outline any changes and provide justification.

There were no deviations of note from the project's budget. See attached page on expenditure.

Conclusion

7. Provide an assessment of the likely impact of the results and conclusions of the research project for the cotton industry. What are the take home messages?

Take home messages from the field can be demonstrated by grower practice change – appendix 1.

The likely impact of the results of the project is to demonstrate the success of the NDO role and to therefore ensure further funding for this necessary and valued work.

Extension Opportunities

8. Detail a plan for the activities or other steps that may be taken:

(a) To tell other CGAs/growers/regions about your project.

The NDO already communicates on an ongoing basis with the RDO's in other cotton valleys, and will continue to, as this D&E team meet on a regular basis. The NDO will continue to encourage RDO's to join in Upper Namoi meetings and to experience different extension techniques. These RDO's can then use some of the information or techniques with the growers in their own valleys.

(b) To keep in touch with participants

An application for ongoing funding for this role has been successful through an FRP, which ensures ongoing contact with the grower participants from this project.

(c) For future projects

To see a detailed plan for activities for future projects, see the recently signed FRP – 'Network Development Officer – Upper Namoi Valley'.