

Kondinin Group Farming Ahead Conference - Sydney 2010

The theme of the conference centered on organised grower groups and where they fitted in the agricultural research landscape. There were many stories on why the groups had been formed and some of these included; to drive innovation, to leverage funding, to provide social networking, to keep farms competitive and provide services that governments were failing to provide.

The conference also highlighted the changing state of Australian farmers generally. The average of a farmer is over 50 and rising, more than 70% have no formal qualifications and there are three employees per farm unit. It was highlighted that there was a need for assisting farmers with succession planning and the need to build capacity within the farming sector. This could be achieved through workshops and meetings.

Agricultural research funding was discussed. The argument of private verses public funding was centre stage. This included a discussion on both the funding and extension of rural research. With the governments trying to pull out of the public funding of R & D and extension who was going to pick up the slack? Some of the grower groups were attempting to take up this slack however group dynamics came into the fore, along with the lack of ability to source funding from the RDCs and other bodies.

The need to keep “ahead of the pack” was seen as a must for Australian farmers if they were to remain viable and profitable in the long term. It was noted that farmers had to become 1.5% more productive every year to remain profitable and that society is past both peak oil and phosphate production. To achieve future viability there is the need to become more efficient, to ensure productivity growth and to keep using new technology as it became available. This may involve changing farming practices as smarter methods become more viable with the new technology. It was noted that new technology was expensive and that farming debt was increasing due to its use. The trend of increasing debt and declining profitability needs to be reversed if farmers are to remain viable.

The cotton industry has remained a viable industry for many years. This has been achieved through the adoption of new technology and the improvement of farming practices. This will need to continue into the future to ensure its future. Targeted research is a must to improve the returns to Australian cotton farmers. Compared with other industries, the cotton industry has mastered targeted research that has allowed the industry to remain profitable over a long period of time. The viability, profitability and future of any agricultural industry depends on the willingness of the industry to change as the operating environment changes.

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