Farmer Groups - A Fad or the Future

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FARMER GROUPS –

AFAD OR THE FUTURE?
INTRODUCTION

The question I have asked is ‘Are farmer groups a fad or the future?’ I believe there is no question about it. Farmer groups ARE an important part of future agricultural extension. With shrinking government resources devoted to extension, a farmer group approach has many advantages. These advantages have been shown in Western Australia with landcare catchment groups and lice cell groups and these have been recognised by both extension workers and farmers.

What makes these groups different to groups of the past? Farmer groups have come and gone in an almost cyclical fashion. An exception is the Kondinin Group, which started off as a small pasture improvement group and has developed into a significant agricultural extension organisation. Some dairy farmer groups in Victoria have also become well established. Certainly, there has been more groups succumb than to continue from strength to strength. Of course, a group’s demise may not reflect failure. If the group goals have been achieved, then the lifespan of the group has been reached.

So, why should groups of the future be any different? Is it our expectation that they continue to function as a permanent entity in the future? Certainly, the two major farmer groups which exist in this state - catchment groups and lice cell groups - differ from groups of the past. They have a strong community base; there is group ownership of the problem being addressed and extension workers providing support have received some training in group skills. Therefore, I believe the real question is ‘What FORM will farmer groups take?’, not whether they will exist in the future.

I’ve divided the talk into two parts. The first part describes several programmes I learnt about whilst in Canada and the second part deals with farmer groups in Western Australia, particularly lice cell groups.
There are many soil conservation programmes which are available to Canadian farmers, with varying budgets, number of farms involved and levels of success. Three programmes operating in Ontario in the late 1980's, to promote soil conservation, collectively account for nearly $100 million, over a five year period. A large amount of money is also being channelled into rural development programmes.

I will describe five programmes and then concentrate on the last one which I believe may be the key to all others succeeding and which could be the key to the future improvement of rural extension in Western Australia.

As I only visited the province of Ontario, I cannot comment on group extension activities in other parts of Canada. Ontario appears to be the largest agricultural producer in Canada. It accounts for 40% of Canada's entire food processing production and generates more than $17 billion annually. There are 72,000 farms in Ontario which account for about one-quarter of all farms in Canada.

1. Community Pasture Associations

These associations were developed in the 1960's with the objective of improving the income of livestock farmers, by enabling them to increase the carrying capacity of their farms through rented, supervised pasture at low cost. This programme was funded by the Federal and Provincial Governments and was introduced during a recession in agriculture and at a time when farmers wanted to sell their land. Basically, the government bought the land and leased it to young farmers who wanted to farm but couldn't purchase a farm outright.

Much time and effort by individuals is needed to set up and run a community pasture. A committee coordinates the programme and usually a pasture manager is employed on a part-time basis to oversee the day to day activities. The group consists of ten to fifteen farmers, with a restriction of about twenty head of cattle each. Cattle are grazed during the spring and summer. Trials are conducted and these are a focus for demonstration days. An annual twilight field day, concluding with a BBQ attracts 80-100 farmers and is a great way to bring the community together.

This type of farmer group relies on a committee structure, support from a district government adviser and a technical manager. The committee is responsible for the organisation of the community pasture.
2. LAND STEWARDSHIP PROGRAMME

This is a government programme, with $38 million committed for four years (1990-1994), which provides incentives for farmers to adopt new practices or build structures as part of their conservation farm plan, or as an environmental protection measure. Basically, a farmer can apply for a grant to help implement proposals such as crop residue management, purchase of conservation equipment, pesticide handling facilities and manure storage and handling systems. Up to 50% of the costs of projects can be applied for through the grant.

This programme is administered through the industry based Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association, with support from the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food (OMAF). Grants are also given to the Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association to establish Land Stewardship Committees. Applications for grants are encouraged from farmers and organisations for farm demonstrations and evaluation, as well as organisations who promote and provide education programmes on conservation.

A Land Steward is generally known by other farmers throughout the district and farmers may visit the Land Steward to talk about the practices which have been adopted. Land Stewards often host field day visits organised by the local OMAF office.

This programme relies on an industry based committee structure with OMAF support.

3. NEIGHBOUR TO NEIGHBOUR PROGRAMME

This was introduced in 1989 and is based on a programme operating in Missouri. It encourages farmers to gain a first hand view of soil and water conservation practices. The Neighbour to Neighbour Programme assists and formalises contact between farmers. It is not uncommon to find that a Land Steward will host a demonstration site as part of the Neighbour to Neighbour programme.

Fact sheets contained in a self-guided tour programme assists farmers to visit Neighbour to Neighbour sites and talk to farmers about the changes they have implemented. I visited several farmers involved in the Neighbour to Neighbour programme coordinated by the Grand River Conservation Authority in Ontario. The self-guided tour programme covers several counties and provides contact details of the host farmer, what technique is being used and some facts and figures about the demonstration. There has been a reasonable response by local farmers, but it could be improved. One farmer has been quite busy hosting agricultural student class visits.

It is recognised that there are many innovative farmers who have acquired a wealth of knowledge about farming practices and who are fortunately eager to share. It is important to remember that there are many ideas and techniques being used which have not emerged from government or private sector researchers.
Many farmers with years of experience and knowledge of the land, have identified problems and developed their own solutions. The Neighbour to Neighbour Programme has been particularly useful by providing an opportunity for farmers to have access to a rapid and effective means of disseminating information.

This programme differs from the preceding two, as there is no farmer based committee operating. In fact, the entire programme is organised by a government department.

4. WATERLOO CONSERVATION YIELD COMPETITION

Competitions are an interesting way to bring farmers together. It draws two groups of farmers - those that enter the competition and those who wish to see the results. The Waterloo Conservation Yield Competition has four main objectives. These are to:

- Award prizes based on reducing soil loss and assessment of the economics of production.
- Collect data on management practices for conservation farming systems e.g. residue cover, herbicide use and weed populations
- Provide workshops, meetings and tours of competition sites for farmers to discuss the data collected so that they can use the information on their farms.
- Use the results to publish a booklet for local farmers to use as a reference.

Rules are outlined for the competition as well as the method used for scoring. The competition is conducted by a crop adviser from OMAF and run in conjunction with the Waterloo Soil and Crop Improvement Association. The results of the competition are available in December and a farmer workshop to discuss the results is planned for early next year.

5. ADVANCED AGRICULTURAL LEADERSHIP PROGRAMME

This programme has been jointly developed by:

- Ontario Federation of Agriculture
- OMAF
- University of Guelph
- Foundation for Rural Living

The Foundation for Rural Living is an interesting group. It is a volunteer, charity organisation whose goals are to:

- Educate the public about the importance of rural Ontario and the agricultural industry to the economic and social well-being of the province.
- Support projects which will strengthen the agricultural industry and rural community.
Their major role in the Advanced Agricultural Leadership Programme (AALP) is to raise money.

This programme began in 1984 and aims to develop leadership in rural communities by providing a training course, not only for farmers, but for representatives of agribusiness, financial institutions and public agencies to equip participants with the necessary skills and knowledge to direct agriculture in the future.

Participants should gain a greater knowledge of issues affecting agriculture at a national and international level and be better able to deal with complex issues facing rural communities. They should also improve their communication skills and ability to set goals and work with groups. It is a two year programme with 30 selected participants paying $3500 to attend nine 3-day seminars and two 2-week study tours.

The Lincoln Agricultural College in New Zealand has operated a similar programme to the AALP since 1979. The College also organises two-day workshops on leadership skills. Over 300 farmers have completed the course and three graduates have become cabinet ministers, one has become vice-chairman of the New Zealand Dairy Board and another has become the President of the Federated Farmers - all influential positions.

The programme appears to have had an impact on the approach and vision of rural leaders. However, its potential for farmer group extension at the local level has not been greatly pursued.
Where does this lead us with respect to farmer groups concerned with animal health and production issues? I believe that dissemination of information through group activities is very effective. Most people who have worked with farm improvement groups or catchment groups acknowledge the potential benefits which can be gained through groups.

Livestock health and production is just one area which farmers need to keep up-to-date. Farmers may gain knowledge on many aspects of farming through group activities. They can gain it faster, have it tuned to local conditions and can reap the rewards of sharing with others. This allows constructive questioning and exchange of information which may modify and improve techniques.

Groups can form in many ways. The task is to work out the most appropriate method for each problem at hand. With community problems such as sheep lice eradication, local neighbour groups are the logical choice. For land conservation issues, catchment groups are the logical choice.

It should be noted that there are fundamental differences between community land conservation and sheep lice eradication, even though both programmes are based on farmer groups. Land conservation district committees and catchment groups can apply for grants to undertake local projects. The sheep lice eradication campaign does not provide project funds for farmers. The National Soil Conservation Programme is a federal government initiative. In comparison, the lice eradication campaign is a state campaign which relies upon an annual grower contribution, as well as Department of Agriculture support.

Finally, technical advice to catchment groups is provided through a programme funded project officer, whereas the lice cell group leader, who is a farmer, becomes the source of technical information to other farmers in the cell group. This technical input by growers themselves, promotes ownership of the programme and a sense of empowerment.
LICE CELL GROUP FORMATION

The Sheep Lice Eradication Campaign started in 1987 and shire lice liaison committees were established by Departmental officers, with support from local WAFF and PGA representatives. Departmental field staff were given basic training in group facilitation techniques to assist with the formation and support of lice liaison committees.

After three years, about 60 shires had a lice committee which met at least twice per year. The level of activity of each committee varied.

The main role of the committee was to prepare a map of the shire showing each property and to mark which one had received positive lice detection results. Properties with several positive tests were classified as having a persistent lice infestation. This information, combined with local knowledge, was used to define the causes of the persistent infestations and to then discuss and agree on a solution to deal with the problem.

Examples of agreed action included:

- the discussion of treatment methods and management practices by a committee member and/or stock inspector with the farmer
- organise community musters
- coordinate community shearing and treatments.

In 1990, committees in the Katanning area recognised a need for neighbouring farmers to work together and for farmers to receive lice detection test (LDT) results faster. Hence, the formation of cell groups. The shire map was divided up into discrete areas referred to as cells. Each committee member volunteered to act as a leader for the cell group which usually consisted of ten to fifteen neighbouring farmers. In many cases, the groups were based on existing groups, especially bush fire brigades.

CELL GROUP LEADERS

The role of the cell group leader is to receive the weekly LDT results from the Katanning district office by mail and then to contact farmers who had a positive LDT result to discuss the possible causes of the infestation and treatment methods. Each cell group leader received a Lice Pack, which is a technical manual designed specifically for cell group leaders. They also receive issues of Licebusters, a newsletter which contains information about the progress of cell groups and changes to the lice campaign, as well as new technical information. The local district office also has an opportunity to send information to the cell group leaders with the weekly LDT results.

A special manual has been developed for farmers and field staff which explains how to set up cell groups. The manual explains the structure of the cell groups, the roles of the lice liaison committee, cell group leader and the Department and how to initiate activity and monitor progress of the cell group.
GROWTH OF CELL GROUPS

The response shown by farmers in the Katanning area to the cell group approach has been very positive. After the Review of the Sheep Lice Eradication Campaign in April 1992, it was agreed by the state committee to encourage the adoption of cell groups by other shire lice committees. Today, it is estimated that 381 cell groups have formed, involving more than 4,500 farmers. Of these, 210 are very active. Cell group leaders notify members of positive LDT results, arrange cell group meetings and maintain a record of local lice infestations and management details of members in the cell group. Group meetings allow for discussion of ways to eradicate lice and prevent re-infestation.

IMPACT OF CELL GROUPS

Five to ten years ago, most farmers found it difficult to openly discuss sheep lice, as it was considered to be a problem on farms with poor management. With the cell group approach, farmers can identify causes and then decide upon a course of group action. The transfer of technical information has been greatly improved and many farmers admit they have increased their level of knowledge significantly. Cell groups have also provided the opportunity for farmers to ask questions and provide feedback to the Department in a more organised manner. The recognition of common problems through this network is constructive and adds cohesion to the group.

The cell group approach has increased the contact between Departmental field staff and local farmers. In some areas, it is estimated that field staff have had personal contact with 60% of farmers in their district. In shires which are fully committed to implementing cell groups, this figure can increase to over 85%. The opportunities of this close liaison has the potential to become one of the most effective extension networks this state has experienced.

FUTURE OF CELL GROUPS

Continuation of these groups could be very useful to deal with livestock problems recognised by members of the group. For example, footrot may be of major concern in one area, drench resistant worms might be another and supplementary feeding for optimum wool production another. The group decides its own aims and goals. The important point is that a mechanism to allow change and improvements to take place has been established. The group approach will not solve all the problems farmers might have, but in general there is sufficient common ground between neighbouring farmers to act as a basis to form a cell group.
TRAINING

The success of all groups is dependent upon the quality of the leadership. These groups to date have achieved a great deal. If cell group leaders receive leadership training, the effectiveness of these groups could be greatly enhanced. This has been recognised as an important need for the continuation and strengthening of cell groups.

The Canadian Advanced Agricultural Leadership Programme (AALP) is fairly high powered, expensive and probably not suitable for the training of cell group leaders. The 'Leadership in Action' workshop which runs in parallel to the AALP, is a 4-day workshop which gives participants an opportunity to improve their skills in:

- working with groups
- conducting effective meetings
- implementing change
- goal setting
- problem solving

In Western Australia, team skills workshops have been offered to members of land conservation district committees and catchment groups. The day/night workshop aims to develop a team approach and to improve committee meetings.

A short training course, based on both these workshops, combined with a segment covering technical aspects of lice eradication could have a major impact on the development and effectiveness of farmer groups. If farmers supply the motivation and commitment and they are given the skills, organisational structure and support to participate in group extension, improvements in agricultural extension may be achieved which may not be attained using traditional extension methods.

CONCLUSION

The need to re-vitalize rural communities and provide the support and framework for farmers to take control and direct agriculture has been recognised. In Canada, the well-being of the rural community and the prosperity of the agricultural industry are interdependent.

Effective local leadership is an important factor if groups are to remain viable in the future. Not everyone can or should be leaders, but rural communities need more leaders and there are many people who have the potential to become involved and contribute. It should be remembered that leaders are only leaders because they have support from their colleagues.

There are farmers who are willing to share their knowledge but it is providing a network to allow information to flow easily to other farmers which is vital. The cell group approach combined with rural leadership training may be the answer to ensure effective future extension of livestock health and production issues.