Empowering next generation agriculture

Innovation Working Group (IWG) Session #2

Meeting minutes

Monday 14 October; 10:00am – 1:00pm RSL Hall, Donaldson Street, Corryong

Facilitators: Karensa Menzies, David Lamb

Attendees: Alex Nicholas (beef producer), Andrew Whitehead (beef producer; Towong Shire Mayor), Cain Jenkins (beef producer), Chris Mirams (ag consultant; UM Community Leadership Program), David Lamb (Food Agility CRC), Ed Durham (beef/seed producer), Gary Saliba (strategy consultant; UM Community Leadership Program), Grace Findlay (Food Agility CRC), Jasmine Pierce (beef producer), Jayden Pierce (beef producer), Jo Mackinnon (UMI Chair, beef/seed producer), Jo Nicholas (dairy producer), Karensa Menzies (agrifood advisory , Kylie McCreadie (AgVic), Lachlan Campbell (NECMA), Maya Oya (community), Neville Nugent (dairy producer), Olivia Nugent (dairy producer), Sarah Whiteley (UMI; beef producer), Toby Jones (beef producer), Tom Dempster (beef producer).

Apologies: Alex Nankervis, Molly Waters, Anthony Dore, Anna Paton, Leigh Paton, Emma Paton, Tony Robinson, George Galbraith, Cameron Sheather, Milli Mackinnon, Matt Thompson

Associated documents

- Terms of Reference for *Empowering next generation agriculture* IWG
- 'How we got here' – Summary of IUM LDS stages so far as relate to agriculture (14.10.24)
- IWG-2 workshop slide deck 14.10.24

Welcome & introductions

Acknowledgement of Country: *We acknowledge the traditional owners of the country on which we meet, and pay our respects to their Elders, both past, present and emerging.*

Noted the 10 beef and dairy producers' apologies (above) would like to remain informed and involved in the outcomes of today's session. Most participated in the 1:1 interviews.

Noted the IWG Terms of Reference distributed amongst participants will be added to IUM website.

Recap

Referred to the 'How we got here' – Summary document provided to participants for detail. Highlighted the first IWG session (13 August) agreed to pursue the following two areas:

(i) Foundational water work, such as an audit, to position the community to understand what it has and if there are realistic options to pursue greater water access
   - This scoping is being explored and the IWG will be kept informed.

(ii) IWG continue to explore opportunity for a 'data driven' agriculture project

NB data driven agriculture refers to 'Engaging next/younger generation in exploring how to leverage data and data-driven decision making, technologies and modern practices to improve productivity, sustainability and overall producer/regional market competitiveness.'

Since August 13, the following activities occurred

- *September:* 1:1 interviews with 11 Upper Murray farmers to better understand their systems, challenges & opportunities.
- *Early Oct:* Online survey open to all UM farmers/producers to expand on above findings.

Insights from UM producer interviews and online survey

Interviews with Upper Murray producers and the online survey was led by Karensa, working closely with Food Agility (Dave Lamb, Lucy Hickman, Grace Findlay) and UMI.

1:1 UM producer interviews

Semi structured interviews with 11 UM producers across dairy, beef, sheep and mixed cropping operations were based around the following questions:

- Tell us about your journey & where you are now
- What works and what doesn't in context of own farming operation
- What are the main challenges you face
- How much do you rely on tech or data
- What else interests you (tech/data, other)
- Appetite for change (tech & data on farm, benchmarking, regional value add)

Findings from these interviews formed the foundation of the online survey questions.

Dave Lamb highlighted key insights from the interviews, including most producers were largely second to fifth generation producers. A large proportion left the area for work or study and then, for a variety of reasons including the fires, COVID, drought, siblings leaving, aging parents, have returned. Many are back with a fresh set of eyes. Parents are still involved on the farm with the appetite for allowing children to explore. All producers are keen to do things better, do things differently or do different things.

The biggest opportunity is youth and people returning to the area which can be built on. There is an appetite for using technology on farms – e.g. understanding soil moisture and soil moisture probes, forage growth and pasture/crop growth, monitoring stock growth. There is some reliance on data/software for business financials/accounting but not much on day-to-day farming activities.

Online producer survey

Refer to slides 6 – 11 of workshop presentation deck. Briefly key findings included:

- 28 farmer responses, with majority in the target audience 'next gen' age bracket
- Majority beef farmers with good dairy, sheep, mixed cropping/livestock representation.
- Most farms, or farm areas managed were > 500 acres in size.
- Overwhelming, people want and see potential to do things better (productivity, profitability, sustainability) on their farm, and potential for the region as a whole to do better.
- The following ranked highly by producers as areas of interest to improve:
  - water management – optimise access/storage & utilisation (rain-fed, groundwater or traded)
  - feed gap and pasture, fodder or crop productivity (quality, yield, varieties, etc.)
  - nutrient efficiencies
  - regional branding
- The main on-farm challenges indicated by farmers supported these areas of interest. The highest ranked challenges are managing seasonal pressures & weather variability, input costs & access, weed control and optimising water use. Labour access, weed/pest control; work/life balance; and access to regionally specific information were also notable challenges
- Main challenges experienced with regard to technology adoption &/or precision agriculture practices include navigating which technology to use/is relevant; perceived value & confidence in the tech, cost of implementation (capital and time); and telecoms connectivity. All four 'other' comments related to resistance to change by older generation.
- Strong interest in benchmarking farm performance; sharing specific farm data with farmers; contributing to an innovation ecosystem; and opening farm gate to other farmers indicates you, UM farmers, have a keen interest and great potential to work together.

Shaping & testing a project framework

Dave Lamb summarised key elements of 'next gen' Upper Murray producers - an appetite to trial; to understand and learn from what other people are doing (knowledge & skills sharing); opportunity as a collective of farms aggregating and pooling to create regional value - and described how this could shape into a project framework with an UM producer innovation group focused on production agriculture. Refer to slide 12.

Dave noted it will require a commitment to share, everyone in on the project needs to put in and get something back. Upper Murray Producer Plus (UMP+) is only an example name.

Example themes and activities that could flow across on farm experimentation, sharing of knowledge, skills & benchmarking etc, and into regional value include;

- Water management – rain is the biggest asset. Climate intelligence is vital.
- Feed production – timing and scheduling
- Precision agriculture – e.g. soil variability, soil tests
- Weed control – how to use technology
- Productivity and sustainability

In testing the concept Dave outlined elements of a project anatomy for consideration. This includes a Steering Committee and significant resourcing into the 'arms and legs' (executive/liaison type role/s). IWG participants were asked if any 'alarm bells' sounding – none were expressed. Support was given to proceed to brainstorming key features.

Brainstorming session

IWG participants spent significant time discussing and brainstorming their thoughts of (i) what do you want to learn; (ii) how do you want to learn/ what to learn together; (iii) what do you want to do with it, onto 3 large wall posters: 1. Water & nutrients; 2. Feed gap; 3. Productivity & sustainability.

These will be collated after the IWG meeting/workshop and used to inform detail of the project scope.

Discussion points and considerations raised included

- Investment is getting people involved and keeping the project alive.
- Volunteerism level is high but there is a lot of fatigue, and many groups already exist.
- Need to consider governance. Funding for paid position/s, possible auspicing role for UMI.
- Concern about another group being established – need to align with existing.
- Key part of proposition is to determine what is already going on in the region and how the project will enhance that work.
- Regional value add - includes personal farm but also the region; change wording to 'my farm; our region'. The latter may initially serve as high-level aspiration.
- Roadmap and potential project timeline (2 years) with example elements. First six months – understanding and nurturing properties; may include up to 30 producers.

    Notion 1 – innovation ecosystem
    Notion 2 - demonstration farms, knowledge sharing
    Notion 3 – healthily ambitious timeline!

Outcomes and next steps

All attendees agreed to pursue the model and put forward an application for funding, and to form a Steering Committee. It was agreed that the initial Steering Committee members would be Jo Mackinnon (UMI), Ed Durham, Karensa Menzies, Dave Lamb and one or more other producers. Interested producers to follow up with Karensa, alternatively, consultation will occur to fill this producer role/s. Steering Committee to start small and membership to be reconsidered once funding secured.

It was agreed that the first role of the Steering Committee would be to submit a grant application by end of 2024 or early 2025. The Steering Committee will approach IWG participants for comment and feedback as required.

Information obtained from today's brainstorm (large posters and post it notes) will inform the funding application – which will seek funding for the UMP+ framework/anatomy. For example, to set six farmers up with a kit/data to address six key drivers. Once set up, benchmarking can be established with a group of producers. It is intended that the finer project detail such as who (producers) will be involved, the farms and what will be done will be determined once funding is secured.

Attendees agreed that Upper Murray Inc (UMI) be the grant applicant and auspicing body of any grant funds.

Food Agility to follow up discussions with Charles Sturt University, who may be able to help with the underpinning project activities.

Meeting concluded at 1:23pm