



ENVIRONMENTAL CHAMPIONS PROGRAM

CASE STUDY - CALDWELL CLUSTER GROUP



CALDWELL CLUSTER GROUP - CALDWELL

The Ricegrowers' Association of Australia's (RGA) Environmental Champions Program (ECP) isn't just for rice growers and that's never been more evident than in the rural community of Caldwell.

The farming families who make up the Caldwell Cluster Group couldn't be more diverse – between them they farm livestock, winter cropping, wine grapes and rice. The group meets regularly to share information, support one another and develop a bright vision for the future of their land.

For the Caldwell Cluster Group, swapping ideas and seeing real examples of on-farm and environmental benefits up close keeps each farmer motivated. As a result they have begun to develop a number of coordinated strategies and the Caldwell group members insist that this is just the beginning.

PRACTICAL ON FARM BENEFITS

Established in September 2005 by local rice grower Tim Garden (pictured above right with his father-in-law Ian Douglas), the Caldwell group started with a few rice growers sharing advice and problem solving. It quickly developed into a more formal arrangement with a group of more than 15 farming families coming together on a regular basis to share farming and business information and to improve their understanding of the environment in which they operate.

The ECP concept of combining farming practices with environmental stewardship and improved business productivity has provided a solid vision for the Caldwell Cluster Group. By working around the busiest farming periods, the group members are aiming to hold six meetings a year and the group has progressed through the Level One component of the ECP structure and is now working on Level Two.

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The Champions program is based on issues that farmers deal with day in and day out such as land use, water management, chemical applications and environmental guardianship in order to look after the land for the community and future generations.

The group has also started to develop their own strategic direction by rotating the location of the meetings across the different farms and splitting their meeting time between environmental and general farming issues. In order to share information and ideas, each host farmer provides an overview of their farming methods after the meeting is over. As part of this, the group members have taken the opportunity to explore each other's chemical sheds, undertake training for the local RGA waste oil recycling facility and brainstorm district strategies.

THE POWER OF INFORMATION

Water management is a critical issue for the Caldwell group. Previously, most of the group members derived more than half of their income from rice growing. With increased uncertainty over water availability many farmers have been forced to diversify their practices and add other income streams such as winter cropping or livestock production.

Tim says a group focus is to develop more knowledge about the established water market so that the individual members can participate in trading water. "There's a lot of uncertainty, as people aren't sure how the water market really works in the area we're in, and so what we're wanting to do is to get people out here to explain to us what the value of water is, what it means if we want to sell water, what it means if we want to buy water, how do we go about buying temporary water.



"Climate change is another topical issue at the moment. (The group) is a great opportunity to get people together and really learn how the weather works and what it really means to us, how it will affect our business how we need to run our business. The Champions program gives us a structure to inform ourselves and plan for the issues that we face as farmers."

Another focus area of education for the group is to develop better Occupational Health and Safety compliance by first working out the requirements within a farm setting and then finding the best way to fulfill them.

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THE BENEFITS OF A DIVERSE GROUP

Originally the Caldwell Cluster Group was made up of only farmers that included rice as part of their farming enterprise. However the Caldwell group has evolved to encompass members from a variety of non-rice farming enterprises. The group has further diversified with some members broadening their rice based systems to incorporate other crops, vineyards or livestock production due to changes in water availability.

Tim says the group diversity has proven to be beneficial as it often provides a range of different approaches to farming methods. For example some of the farmers in the group have low levels of chemical usage and have been able to share their practices and outcomes with the wider group.

In addition, several farmers have grown up on their land as it has passed from generation to generation; some have married into the community; and others have recently moved to the district. The different backgrounds result in different practices and knowledge being brought to the table.

DISTRICT STRATEGIES

By establishing this type of farmers' network, the group can cooperate on catchment management issues for the betterment of the region but still retain independence for production activities. A group initiative that's currently being planned is to have the native vegetation fencing and plantings mapped across the region in order to establish wildlife corridors down the track. When the mapping's completed, farmers wanting to do work on their property will be able to use the data to work out the best

way to progress and add value across the region rather than viewing their property in isolation.

Beef producers and wine grape growers Donald and Jo Hearn (pictured below) own a 1100 acre property called 'Restdown' and believe that the sharing of information and responsible environmental management is the way forward.

"You actually become aware of other options available in farming and other ways of getting the most out of your particular property whether it's through native vegetation, wildlife corridors, looking after the soil, your irrigation or recycling systems."

Recognition and community understanding of the ECP work is also important. The Caldwell Cluster Group hopes to have local council representatives attend future meetings so that they can see first hand how the cluster setup is producing a benefit for individual farmers and the wider district.





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CULTURAL SHIFT AND SOCIAL ASPECTS

The concept of sharing detailed farming information is relatively new and a cultural shift when compared to previous farming generations, according to Tim. “Go back 20 or 30 years and that never would have happened in the rural industry. Most farmer whilst they talked to one another, they didn’t really discuss what they were doing on their farm. You sort of kept your trade secrets.”

Another area of change is the proactive decision by the group to accommodate their meetings to include the views of women on the land. When the group first formed it was only the men that attended, now a number of wives and partners are able to participate and provide a different perspective on their farming operations.

For Wendy McDonald, who farms rice and sheep just north of the Murray River with husband Peter (both pictured above), the cluster group is proving to be very beneficial. “We enjoy the program. It gives us a chance to socialize with our peers, exchange (farming) information and stay motivated.”

THE FUTURE

There are still plenty of challenges ahead for the group. The establishment of environmental corridors across farms and issues such as carbon trading are just some of the areas for future discussion as the group evolves further.

For group members such as Peter McDonald, whose family has been farming along the Murray River since 1877, the practicalities of sharing information and producing sustainable outcomes are invaluable. “We’ve got it (the farm) in fantastic condition and we want to make sure it gets passed onto the next generation in just as good a condition, if not better condition. That’s why we chose to join Champions.”

The Environmental Champions Program is an initiative of the Australian Rice Industry.

Find out more by contacting us or visiting our website

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