



Crops, Rumps and Woolly Jumpers: An Innovative Extension Approach Enabling the Complexities of Mixed Farming to Be Shared and Understood

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Introduction

The sheep-wheat belt of southern Australia accounts for about 19% and 57% of total Australian beef and sheep production, respectively. Most farm businesses in this zone are family owned and contain a mix of livestock and cropping enterprises. While the focus of most research, development and extension for mixed farming systems focuses on single components of the system (lamb, wool, beef, pastures, crops), the systems are complex and dynamic and cannot be understood by analysing the components in isolation. The enterprise synergies are dependent on economic, environmental and social factors. The farmers themselves are best equipped to explain the system function and the interplay between the components.

The traditional conference format with technical experts presenting their findings was deemed to be inadequate to relay the complexity of mixed farming systems, stifling two-way information flow and the opportunity for experts to acquire tacit knowledge held by farmers. This paper outlines an innovative extension approach based on story telling, video footage and discussion, providing technical experts with an opportunity to appreciate the complexity and farmer decision processes. This approach fostered audience participation and interaction, leading to a better understanding of the complexities of mixed farming and how conflicts between diversification and specialisation may be resolved by the management team. Facilitated discussion also highlighted potential areas of research, development and extension.

Methods

A panel comprising five farmers and one farm consultant represented a range of enterprise combinations from across the mixed farming zone of southern New South Wales (NSW). A public forum was held in Wagga Wagga on the 22nd of October 2012, and live-streamed on the internet and to a satellite meeting at Condobolin. Central to the forum were a collection of short audio-visual 'narratives' filmed on farm, which followed set guidelines to describe the farm

operation of each panel member.

Each narrative was explored via a 20-minute facilitated discussion between the audience and the panel, followed by five minutes of reflection, with the audience encouraged to share their experiences with up to eight fellow participants seated at round tables. The audience included farmers, bankers, educators, scientists, and representatives from industry organisations and various government agencies.

The afternoon consisted of a series of smaller sessions that added depth to themes covered in the morning discussion. Three agricultural economists presented and led activities on the trends and challenges of agricultural production, the keys to success in mixed farming, decision making and risk assessment. The audience participated in activities such as 'partial budgeting' and 'deal or no deal' risk assessment.

Participants were surveyed on forum conduct, content and usefulness (Coutts 2012).

Results

The forum participants:

- Were impressed with the interactive format, use of video presentations and electronic media.
- Supported the audio-visual presentations as a surrogate to visiting each farm, allowing appreciation of the different biophysical challenges and opportunities faced by the panel members.
- Valued discussion time with 80% feeling they had 'a lot' or 'ample' opportunity to raise issues.
- Appreciated the novel approach and would like to see it used more commonly.
- Appreciated the opportunity to participate via a satellite location, avoiding long distance travel.
- Developed a greater understanding of the complex decision processes facing mixed farming.
- Gained information from the forum that would inform future advice to clients about change.
- Felt the forum would assist decision making and help manage risk.

- Had a greater understanding of mixed farming with 50% of respondents considering increasing their emphasis on livestock, with 77% seeking further information

Success in mixed farming was perceived to occur if:

- Each family member has a specialist role and actively seeks information to build knowledge and confidence in their chosen field.
- Individuals focus on their passion and monitor performance to ensure productivity efficiencies.
- Outsiders with complementary skill sets (sharefarmers, accountants) are contracted to manage or assist with enterprises of least interest.
- An expert network of advisors provides business focus and strengthens decision making.
- Peer support (family, friends, accountants, consultants, government agencies) is utilised.
- A diversity of profitable enterprises are available to reduce business risk.
- The business does not follow trends or market fads; only well-researched evidence based technologies with a demonstrated relative advantage are adopted.
- An evidence-based approach to farm management is taken.
- A long term strategy is defined to allow timely decision making and flexibility in management.
- A business approach is followed – minimising costs, budgeting, recording, monitoring and reviewing.

Post forum follow-up

An educational package targeting secondary and tertiary students, comprising the six panel narratives and footage of the forum is available on YouTube (EH Graham centre 2013). The website has recorded 340 hits.

Discussion and Conclusion

The six panel members at this forum demonstrated the broad diversity of farming businesses typical of the mixed farming zone of south-eastern Australia. Whilst it is

difficult to generalise about such diverse business enterprises, the forum highlighted a number of recurring themes critical to the perceived success of each farming business, such as the relationship between the family members. The complexity of multiple farm enterprises was addressed by each family member undertaking a specialist role to maximise overall business success. External expertise was commonly contracted to manage an enterprise of least interest and provide advice on key activities and business direction.

The novel use of structured audio-visual narratives and facilitated discussion allowed common themes to emerge from very diverse biophysical and social environments. The response from forum participants highlights the potential of this process to focus discussion on resolution of common issues rather than debating points of difference. This pioneering forum paves the way for similar events to stimulate effective interaction between farming communities, industry leaders, policy makers and third party information providers who influence investment in mixed farming research, development and extension programs.

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Forum Chair, Alex Russel Wool Industry Leader NSW DPI; and Forum Facilitator: Cat Nicholls; and students from Charles Sturt University Bachelor of Arts (Television Production): Norah Masige, Michael Christmas, Blake Buckley and Mitch Housler.

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