

SEARCH CRITERIA

Model	Model B: Programmed Learning Model (+)
Industry	Beef, Lamb
Focus/Level	Industry
Delivery Mode of Learning	Workshops, focus farms, action learning, experiential learning
Outcomes	Grazing Management skills, increased profitability.
Special Interest Groups	

1. PROJECT TITLE:

BeefCheque / LambCheque

2. FUNDERS:

The project is 'self-funded' in the sense that delivery is funded by FarmBis (initially 75% and now 50%) and subsidized by Educational Profile Funding through the Rural Training Organisation - Rural Industries Skills Training (RIST). Participants meet the gap (which was in the order of \$200-400/year, now \$500-700/year). The Beef Improvement Association is an owner – although doesn't directly put resources into the program.

3. PROVIDERS:

RIST administers the project (enrolments etc). DPI Victoria is involved through its Meat & Wool Program and provides 75% of facilitators and specialist deliverers. The private sector is the source of the other 25% of facilitators. Facilitators, both public and private, are paid for their services.

4. KEY CONTACTS:

Tim Hollier, Acting Program Manager, Meat & Wool, DPI Victoria:
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Kristy Joward, Specialist Project Officer, Meat & Wool, DPI Victoria:
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Leigh Kildey, Victorian Training Manager, Rural Industries Skills Training (RIST):
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5. INDUSTRY/ISSUE/GEOGRAPHY

The project is aimed at Beef and Lamb producers across Victoria. The projects aim is to develop grazing management knowledge, and skills to increase profitability. Some groups also look at such things as marketing, environment, soil health and other areas.

6. PROJECT CONTEXT

The project started as a pilot in 1995, funded by MLA, DPI and the Beef Improvement Association. Gippsland beef producers who had done other courses (and many of

whom were part of the Grasslands Society of Victoria) initiated the project as they were interested in learning more about pasture and grazing management. The aim was: *growing more grass; using more grass; growing more beef (lamb); making more money.*

The Gippsland pilot was seen as a success and MLA agreed to extend it to the rest of Victoria in 1999. This coincided with the establishment of EDGENetwork® and it initially looked like BeefCheque would lose support. However, it was incorporated into EDGENetwork® and was extended across Victoria in its current form.

BeefCheque started when the industry was in a depressed state (only 18% of beef producers were making a profit). Now the picture is better (with natural fluctuations) and lamb is looking good. The industry is facing a dry winter (2005).

7. PROJECT NICHE

The project aims specifically to give producers grazing management skills so they can make increased profits. Benchmarking is a key part of this.

8. PHILOSOPHY/APPROACH:

The underlying philosophy is that of action and experiential learning...*involve me and I will understand.* Activities are grounded in local focus farms and then on their own properties. It is seen as important for participants to bring their own knowledge and experience to contribute to the learning.

The program is matched to Vocational Educational Training competencies.

9. RESOURCES, MANAGEMENT AND STAFFING STRUCTURES

RIST provides administration resources – funded by course fees, FarmBis and Education Profile funding.

DPI Victoria provides facilitators and specialist resources funded through payments from RIST. There is no project coordinator as such for the project within DPI, rather it comes under the Manager of Beef and Wool program. There was a 0.2 evaluation position for the project but that is now not funded and will not be utilised.

The private sector facilitators are contracted by RIST.

10. PROCESS/METHODS USED

Year 1: 7 workshops based on PROGRAZE (pasture management, matching livestock needs, soils and fertiliser etc). Select a focus farm for year 2.

Year 2: 10 sessions based around a focus farm, doing feed budgets, benchmarking own farms, specialist delivery sessions (for example from Vets or marketing specialists) where the group has flexibility to choose topics of interest.

Year 3: Visit each others' farms. Each participant prepares a dossier on their own farms using benchmarking data from the previous year. Each session is help on a different farm.

A facilitator sees the group through all of the sessions. Groups are 10+ participants in size (a requirement to cover funding).

11. IMPACTS TO DATE.

Results from the **Pilot phase** are as follows:

In the Pilot Phase (1995-2000), there were 15 groups comprising of 420 participants and 370 businesses.

Bennett's hierarchy was used as framework for evaluating the program.

Level 3 - Engagement of producers in Gippsland

Group records are used to provide data to show the degree of 'engagement' achieved in Gippsland.

Impacts

- BeefCheque has reached 9% of the Beef producers in Gippsland between 1995 and 2000.
- Since then 3 new groups have formed in Gippsland and at least one group has re-visited the material in years 1-2.
- A 9% involvement of producers in BeefCheque exceeded the initial target of 6 % (220 producers)
- The project continues to grow in areas outside of Gippsland with over 19 groups in other parts of the state in 2002.
- The brand name of BeefCheque is known and familiar outside the domain of 'group members'.

Levels 5 & 6 - Degrees of change (KASA and practice)

Two surveys were conducted in 1997 and 1999 to examine producer's attitudes, reactions, and degree of practice change (Walsh 2000). The participation rates were 177 respondents (70% of BeefCheque participants) for the first survey (1997) and 114 respondents (45% of BeefCheque participants) for the second (1999). Each survey consisted of yes/no questions designed to elicit specific information about practice change, and open ended questions to gather information about attitudes to BeefCheque and future aspirations. The key questions analysed in this paper can be distilled as the following;

1. Please nominate (from a list provided) the practices that you used before BeefCheque and since (1997 and 1999 survey). For practices not tried, please indicate why (1997 survey only).
2. Please list the 3 most important grazing management practices you have learnt from BeefCheque in priority order (1999 survey only).
3. Will you continue to be an active member of your BeefCheque group in the future? Why/why not? (1999 survey only).
4. Compared to before you were involved with the BeefCheque program, do you now have a higher pasture utilisation on your farm? (1999 survey only).
5. Do you believe your participation has or will result in improved returns on your farm? (1999 survey only).
6. What impact (both good and bad) has BeefCheque had on your farm business? (1999 survey only).

One-third of respondents to the 1999 survey had not responded to the 1997 and 17 % 'didn't know' if they had responded in 1997 resulting in an overlap or 're-survey' of 57 BeefCheque members from 1997 (32% of 1997 survey respondents).

Impacts

- Being a member of a BeefCheque group gave the participants exposure to new ideas, how they might put them into practice and the confidence to try them.
- Anecdotal evidence from producers indicates that BeefCheque helped producers to feel 'more in control and had greater confidence in their own ability and to try new ideas'.
- The survey results also highlighted that as time progressed, more and more producers who were previous 'non-users' of particular practices became 'users' during their involvement in BeefCheque.
- The overwhelming insight from this response is that BeefCheque has helped producers in a way that may not be immediately measurable but has contributed to the producers overall feeling of being 'in control' and 'able to cope' with the challenges that face them
- The success of BeefCheque is further supported by the knowledge that 92% of the 1999 survey respondents want to continue being active members of their groups in the future. The main reasons for their wish to continue show the importance of 'peer support' and 'social interaction' as well as the obvious 'educational opportunities' and 'technical information'.

In the **post-pilot phase** to 2004, there have been 57 additional BeefCheque groups, comprising of 939 people and 759 businesses. (Overall there have been 72 groups, 1359 participants and 1129 businesses represented). Seven LambCheque groups, comprising of 118 people and 90 farm businesses have been established (4 having now finished).

RIST collects feedback sheets at the end of the course from participants, otherwise there is no formal evaluation being undertaken. RIST has started (in 2005) to do a pre and post survey to capture changes in learning and practice during the 3 years.

There is a lot of anecdotal information about practice change and impact. Some groups have continued to meet/interact post Beef/LambCheque.

An Honour student (Dan Gilmour) undertook a pilot study around Mansfield of 6 BeefCheque Groups (25% of Beef producers in region) which looked at changes in skills and knowledge. It found that producers in BeefCheque groups who were relatively new to the industry (<10 years) had greater gains in knowledge and skills than those who had been in the industry for longer. Producers not in groups had not gained much new knowledge or skills over the period.

13. PROJECT DOCUMENTATION AVAILABLE:

Howard KA, Walsh SJ & Lamb KS (2004) *BeefCheque: a dirty boots approach to achieving profitable beef production in Gippsland* in *Australian Journal of Experimental Agriculture*, Volume 44, pp 851-862.

Walsh S 2000, BeefCheque Final Report, Department of Natural Resources and Environment (now DPI) Victoria, Melbourne.

Gilmour, D, Honours Thesis.

14. ISSUES:

The reduction in funding from FarmBis from 75% to 50% of the costs is having an impact on the number of producers interested in participating. Costs for the producer

has increased from \$200-400 to \$500-700 per person which is resulting in a higher drop-out rate as well.

The lack of funds allocated to evaluation for the program has meant that there is little on-going formal evaluation at the practice change and impact level. The pre and post surveys being implemented by RIST this year will go part way to addressing this.

15. COMMENTS/CONCLUSIONS:

This project is a programmed learning 'plus' model. It goes far beyond a one-off workshop and provides an incredible level of follow-up and ongoing learning. The focus on benchmarking and applying skills to a focus farm as well as their own farms would help to ensure that new knowledge and skills are grounded in practice and have a high level of potential to be used effectively

The evaluation of the pilot provided indications that this approach has the potential for high impact. It is hoped that a systematic, on-going evaluation is put into place to capture the changes and their impact and review the process as needed.

There is scope to put a relatively low-cost mechanism to support groups who wish to continue interaction after the 3 years and continue to build the social and technical capital developed during the program.

The way in which costs are covered appears to be a good model, "self-funded" through programs such as FarmBis and the Education Profile Funds (do other extension projects access these funds?). The new net price per participant is a problem, but it is a relatively low cost for the high level on-going input and the emphasis should be on selling the benefits to producers.

16. REVIEW METHODS:

Interview with Kristy Howard and drawing on the AJEA publication listed earlier.