

**SEARCH CRITERIA**

<b>Model</b>	Model D: Information Access
<b>Industry</b>	Primary industries
<b>Focus/Level</b>	Industry
<b>Approach to information needs</b>	Website, e-newsletter, other
<b>Special Interest Groups</b>	Other

**1. PROJECT TITLE**

Information sites of the week

**2. FUNDERS:**

Department of Primary Industries

**3. PROVIDERS:**

Department of Primary Industries  
David Meikle

**4. KEY CONTACTS:**

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**5.INDUSTRY/ISSUE/GEOGRAPHY:**

The project's target audience primary producers in Queensland who may be geographically and socially isolated from quality-assured information sources which are needed to carry on their daily farming activities. Current subscribers include DPI staff, other Government department staff (Queensland and interstate), proprietors of rural businesses, rural organisations and primary producers and overseas subscribers (mainly from the Philippines). Overall there are approximately 600 subscribers.

The e-newsletter is focused on providing a ready source of information available on the internet for primary producers in an easy to follow format.

**6. PROJECT CONTEXT:**

*Information Sites of the Week* is a weekly email newsletter. It is an annotated list of web sites, all with "clickable" links which was developed and initiated in response to an identified need. This need was identified by David Meikle who noticed that while the World Wide Web (WWW) is an invaluable source of information for primary producers and rural residents, it is by nature chaotic, dynamic and initially confusing. He used his background as a teacher, a librarian, a computer and information systems project manager and a rural resident to develop the concept of a weekly email "digest", that would guide recipients information searching, provide instant useful information and perhaps encourage them to investigate the advantages of new technologies.

After beginning in 1999, the e-newsletter has been accepted by DPI and its subscribers as a long-term, regular, quality-assured source of high value information. It aims to embrace and build on traditional extension concepts of communication, adult education, identify potential improvement and provides ready access to information, the key to better ways of doing things.

#### **7.PROJECT NICHE (SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES):**

The main objective of the project was to compile and distribute, on a weekly basis, a free newsletter which assists primary producers and rural residents obtain and utilise high-quality online information which supports their business and other activities.

Uptake of ICT technologies has been identified as a key to sustaining rural communities and this e-newsletter seeks to provide a way of providing information and incentive to enable this.

#### **8.PHILOSOPHY/APPROACH:**

The *Information Sites of the Week* approach is based on the information access model which focuses on the growing role of the internet, information CDs and distance learning. It deals with individual information seeking needs from a distance.

#### **9. RESOURCES, MANAGEMENT AND STAFFING STRUCTURES:**

The project has been run by David Meikle who also developed and initiated the project in 1999.

#### **10.PROCESS/METHODS USED:**

The first issue of *Information Sites of the Week* was distributed by email to a small group of DPI colleagues encouraging them to use a number of on-line information services such as CAB, AGRICOLA, Current Contents, ASFA. David actively promoted the newsletter and in a relatively short time, the subscription list extended to members of other government departments, members of agricultural organisations and DPI clients.

As the distribution list has grown the range of topics regularly included in the newsletter has expanded. While the core of information remains agricultural, information on web searching, ecommerce, new technologies and a general WWW trends are now included.

The newsletter distribution list is now running of the DPI's discussion list management system ( listserver). This means that subscribers have the ability to manage their own subscriptions and all back copies are available in a searchable online archive. These are available at <http://lists.dpi.qld.gov.au/dpi-INFO-SITES-L.html>

The look and feel of the newsletter has also been improved to a professional standard over the last four years. The DPI Web management group have had considerable input into the newsletter's latest HTML format. It is easy to read, works well, and complies with DPI's soon-to-be-mandatory publication guidelines.

*Information Sites of the Week* is now a registered Australian serial publication with the ISSN (International Standard Serial Number) 1447-8226.

Each week a wide range of relevant news and information sources are scanned into an electronic format. These include press releases and other notifications from DPI and other government and agricultural R&D organisations and newsletters dealing with ICT. Informative items of interest suitable for the target audience are evaluated and selected to assure the quality of the newsletter. This quality assurance process also checks the validity and accuracy of sources as well as proof reading.

The newsletter is distributed via DPI's discussion list (listserver) system. David proactively seeks and responds to feedback and follows up enquiries. He says that this has been invaluable in developing his professional and personal network, as well as providing information and advice where and when it is required.

The newsletter is continually promoted and opportunities are sought to increase circulation (eg press releases, other announcements, presentations at field days and other agricultural events, etc)

#### **11. IMPACTS TO DATE (AND EVALUATION APPROACHES USED):**

Impacts of the newsletter to date are outlined below:

- *Information Sites of the Week* has been continuously published since September 1999.
- The 100<sup>th</sup> issue in October 2001 was supported by a considerable DPI-endorsed media campaign.
- Switch from Outlook distribution list to DPI listserver, late 1999. All copies are available in a searchable online archive.
- Switch to HTML format, October 2002. Revised format, May 2003.
- Assigned an ISSN, early 2003.
- Current format, August 2003.
- Continuing growth in circulation. Currently, approx 600 recipients, excluding those who pass the newsletter on.
- Continuing good feedback from internal and external recipients.
- Currently (18 September 2003), 179 issues

Evaluation approaches used have included subscriber feedback, regular statistical analyses of the subscriber list via the listserver software and continual monitoring of advances in email and related technologies to see how the format and distribution can be enhanced.

#### **12. EFFECTIVENESS:**

Through the feedback obtained by David with regards to the newsletter, it appears that it has been very effective in reaching its target audiences and addressing their needs. Comments from subscribers included:

- "Love the new look."
- "Just thought I would give you some brief feedback now that I have been receiving your newsletter for a few weeks. I have found it very useful and easy to read - and an easy way to glance over what's happening re primary industries."
- "I've just opened your latest Newsletter....and most impressed ! It's getting better and better."

The DPI has also been very supportive of the newsletter with the 100<sup>th</sup> issue in October 2001 supported by a considerable DPI-endorsed media campaign.

**13. PROJECT DOCUMENTATION AVAILABLE:**

Meikle, D, 2003, *APEN Awards for Excellence in Extension submission*, NSW

Copies of the newsletters to date are available on

<http://lists.dpi.qld.gov.au/dpi-INFO-SITES-L.html>

**14. ISSUES:**

It will be important for the newsletter to remain up-to-date and continue to serve the information needs of its subscribers and the client services needs of DPI.

One of the issues with regards to increasing distribution lists is SPAM, particularly if promoted widely on WWW newsletter sites. For this reason David does not intend to follow this path preferring to have 1000 “dedicated” subscribers with whom a reasonably close relationship is maintained than 10,000 “casual” users.

**15. COMMENTS/CONCLUSIONS:**

David’s personal reflections and comments regarding of the newsletter are listed below:

- **Inexpensive!** No printing and negligible distribution costs. The information I supply is freely available so there are no costs in acquiring it. This is in sharp contrast to “traditional” extension reliant on farm visits which have proved too expensive for many providers to continue.
- **Always current.** Unlike the time lag in other written publications, my newsletter each week delivers information and news from that week.
- **Appropriate use of existing technology.** Email is still the so-called “killer ap” on the WWW. While it does retain some novelty value, it is a tried and proven, cheap, ubiquitous and ever expanding communication format. Similarly, the WWW, the information repository that my newsletter deciphers for subscribers, now resides in many rural offices and homes. My newsletter resolves the search engine dilemma by selecting useful and valuable information. It is in keeping with the WORM (write once, read many) information philosophy of the WWW.
- **Opens wide and easy accessible information channels.** Subscribers can contact me any time they choose! I either respond directly or refer them to a valid information source, either a person or a document.
- Promotes DPI and my work unit as technically competent valuable sources of information.
- **Retains a personal approach.** Research indicates that many primary producers do not learn well in a group situation, the scenario which to a degree has replaced traditional “one-to –one” extension. While my newsletter goes to many, I purposely keep it informal and friendly; this encourages feedback and other responses.
- The newsletter has been invaluable to me in developing my professional and personal networks in the agricultural community: researchers, fellow extension and information workers (Australia wide and overseas) and primary producers and their organisations.

**16. REVIEW METHODS:**

- Reviewing online newsletters
- Reviewing available documentation