



# EXTENSIONNET

April 2004  
Vol. 11 No. 3

Newsletter of the Australasia-Pacific Extension Network (Inc)

A0029919P ISSN 1445-2111 Contact: 07 4160 0725 Australia Post approved PP347637000014

## APEN policy gains momentum

### July forum to set scene for national summit

by Greg Leach

Management Committee (Policy)

An APEN forum that will address National Extension Policy in July is the first tangible event that will mark the culmination of several years' thinking about extension policy.

The forum, to be held in Sydney, will be a precursor to a much more significant event - a national summit likely to be held in March 2005 - that will bring together some of the major players from industry and government to plot a way forward for extension policy in Australia.

Why is APEN instigating two events to discuss extension policy? Quite simply, we want to ensure that there is a clear line with extension policy (this will be developed at the first event in Sydney) that can be negotiated and supported by a national audience at the second event (in Canberra). At the national summit negotiations will demand that our draft extension policy position is super-clear, well thought out and backed by APEN. We support that all participants in the Canberra summit will expect to 'give and take' in discussions with political, funding, academic, private and public sector stakeholders. The quest is to develop an 'extension policy' position that all can live with.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Greg Leach (right) is an extension specialist with the Department of Natural Resources, Mines and Energy in Queensland. Here, he's talking policy over lunch with attendees at a recent APEN function in Caloundra, Qld. His email is [greg.leach@nrm.qld.gov.au](mailto:greg.leach@nrm.qld.gov.au).

#### What is 'extension policy', and why do we need it?

It might help to introduce some background. In a specially convened APEN National Executive (NE)\* meeting in July 2003, the policy question was put to NE members and some of APEN's funders and sponsors. The meeting considered the nature of policy at two levels:

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Horticulture Australia



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## APEN policy gains momentum (cont'd from p1)



Long time extension expert **Jeff Coutts** has also contributed considerable intellectual input into the extension policy challenge so far

**It's important to sharpen the focus on policy, and keep it sharp, so that our organisation doesn't drift into a zone of irrelevancy.**



Last edition, I think I promised a shot of me that didn't look so terribly serious. This is a bit more casual, but the overall look is no more beautiful I'm afraid.

1. Extension Policy 'in-agency' – how various agricultural, NRM, environmental, conservation or development agencies support and fund extension staff and resources as a policy instrument to help bring about sustainable futures for rural and regional Australians and their landscapes
2. APEN Policy – how APEN as a peak body advocates extension's role, actively promotes it to agencies and stakeholders, lobbies for it, and defends attacks on it.

At the first level, extension policy might be as simple as maintaining a public definition of 'good' extension and promoting that definition to government departments, industry and other stakeholders. At the second level it might mean that APEN – as a peak extension organisation – informs government agencies or other bodies that is unhappy if extension is discounted, misapplied or removed from the research and development schema.

It's important to sharpen the focus on policy, and keep it sharp, so that extension and APEN doesn't drift into a zone of irrelevancy. If APEN doesn't have anything significant to say in support or defence of extension, then it will be increasingly easier to dilute, sidestep or remove extension altogether. Most APEN members know that extension has not been positioning itself well to meet the rapidly increasing needs of regionalised NRM arrangements. Nor has extension been able to match the ability of traditional science to quantify the net benefits of investment in trials, experiments and research projects, and that this is extension's

weak link. Instead, we need to make other positive claims – both qualitative and quantitative if possible – about the value of extension and ensure that these claims are heard clearly and often by funders, industry, governments, regional bodies, other key stakeholders and our peers.

### It's all Greek to me

Declaring any sort of policy position inevitably tips APEN into a political arena. Whilst some members might feel uncomfortable about this, it's our argument that the world is *already* political because *people* are political (the Greek root 'polis', meaning people, gives rise to words such as police, policy, politics and metropolis). One of the central tenets of extension is that it deals with people, and APEN might be shirking its responsibilities if it takes a 'non-political' approach, and therefore non-policy approach, to doing its business.

This doesn't mean, of course, that APEN needs to be overtly political in ways that bring unwelcome attention from funders, collaborators and especially members. It is vitally important that we get the balance right between being respectful of our members' and sponsors' wishes but at the same time being firm and forthcoming about our views on the value of extension.

That's why the forthcoming Sydney forum will be focused on gathering the views of the biggest possible cross-section of APEN members as we can manage. We need to know members' views on extension policy, extension's role in shaping the eco-environment in rural Australia and how the relation-

### From the editor

I admire the commitment that Greg Leach and his team have applied to the challenge of developing an extension policy (*main story*, page 1). We live in an era when wheels need to be extra squeaky to get the oil, and for too long extension has quietly endured being redirected, restructured or even wiped out. A formidable extension policy may go some way to redressing this historical pattern, and Greg and his team are the right people to do it. Take every chance to contribute to the policy discussions. As extension professionals, we may not get many more chances.

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Extension officers still don't take the concept of evaluation seriously enough, although on the strength of some of the evaluation-themed papers presented at Hobart there is some brilliant thinking being done throughout APEN on this topic. I encourage all members to participate in an online survey of ExtensionNet. Although the CM and I will be very interested in the results, we also need to undertake an evaluation of this newsletter to consolidate continued funding. Follow the link to the survey in the next APEN e-bulletin.

Darren Schmidt

ships between funders, governments, regional bodies and industry should or could affect this role (see [www.extensionpolicy.com.au](http://www.extensionpolicy.com.au) for how you can contribute).

## Get it right before we get it right

The idea of the forum is to ensure that we have a well-considered picture of what extension policy could look like before we take it to the 'big' players: funders, industry and government. This is not to say that representatives from those arenas will not be present at the forum in Sydney – they will be. Their role will be to help guide APEN in making the best decisions about what to think about, how to turn that thought into policy and how to present it in the best possible way.

Some good thinking has already been directed at how the forum should come together. A series of small meetings have taken place around Australia in the past few months and a likely focus for the forum has emerged: market failure. Although there are exceptions, in the main consultants and private advisory services ('commercial extension') have not made efforts to enable behaviour change to achieve coordinated action at the collective, catchment or landscape scale. The market failure zone also intersects with large amounts of public money and the push to regional delivery. The market failure zone will be, therefore, a key focus for the forum and a platform for further efforts in improving extension in this country and beyond.

After the forum, it's likely that we'll have only the one chance to take the concept of 'extension policy' to a much wider and much more demanding audience comprising government, the

media and the public. It's therefore important that we get everything right before we 'get it right': the details, the big picture, and the execution.

The second, larger and public summit will need to seek wide media exposure, intelligent cross-representation of relevant stakeholders and excellent political leverage. It will be aimed at securing strong and unequivocal political and institutional support for extension and putting in place the means to re-conceptualise the tenets of our profession so that it can confidently adapt to fit the needs of the present as well as the future.

## APEN's legacy?

It's worth highlighting that APEN's current funders and partners support our move into the policy arena. For APEN, this is a journey into uncharted waters, but as we've tried to point out throughout this story, merely *advocating* a role for extension may no longer be enough to secure its long-term place in natural resource planning or helping people make the changes they need in order to keep rural industries viable.

In addition to advocacy, it's likely that APEN needs to actively formulate a policy that actively pushes extension into these processes in a way that makes sense to APEN members, its funders, collaborators, governments and industries. It is no longer conceivable that extension's historic sponsors – state governments – have the resources needed to 'push' extension at the state level. In this era, it is likely that extension officers will need to do this themselves through APEN.

If we get this right, it may be one of the greatest legacies APEN can leave for future extension professionals.



At the moment, the board's clean for APEN's policy position, but a series of forthcoming policy summits will start to fill in the details

**Got something to say about extension policy? Is it a waste of time? Best thing that ever happened to extension? Commit your thoughts to an A4 page *this week* and send them to the policy forum., under the 'news' tab [www.extensionpolicy.com.au](http://www.extensionpolicy.com.au)**

## National Extension Policy Forum details

**What:** National Extension Policy Forum (a precursor to a larger national event, probably to be held in Canberra).

**Where:** Sydney, Australia. At the moment, a good slice of extension brainpower seems to be within driving distance of this city and many of our collaborators are in Sydney.

**When:** July 21-22, 2004 (Wednesday and Thursday). We'll need as much preparation as possible before the big Canberra forum next year.

**Why:** to flesh out a credible and workable policy position for extension and then sell this on a national scale.

**Who:** A group of 50 invited participants considering the input of all APEN members through the website below. Have your say!

**More info:** [www.extensionpolicy.com.au](http://www.extensionpolicy.com.au). Everything you need to know about the forum is here.