

# EXTENSIONNET

NEWSLETTER OF THE AUSTRALASIA-PACIFIC  
EXTENSION NETWORK (INC)

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## From the Guest Editor

*Sue Bestow, Agriculture Western Australia*

The sun is shining, the birds are singing, harvest is well under way and the surf is up in the small coastal town of Geraldton WA where I sit and write.

This is my first time editing *ExtensionNet* and may I say that it has been a bit of a trick to fit it in with harvest, and I won't apologise for being a tad late. Anyhow here we go...

This issue has a western focus (no surprise there) looking at what is happening to extension in WA. We take a look at the service that Agriculture Western Australia provides from several angles; firstly a grower's perspective with an article written by wheatbelt farmer Richard McKenna who presents us with how he sees the extension service. We also take a look at how a set of horticulturalists in the

Carnarvon area use our service and how our government agency fits into the wider picture of extension here in WA with an article by yours truly.



*Sue Bestow*

Finally I would like to encourage others to edit this newsletter as it provides a great opportunity to present people's perspective on extension. Don't slack off, it is easy to do, volunteer now!

## From the Chair

*Terry Makin*

### Best Wishes for a Successful Year to All!

APEN held an excellent workshop on monitoring and evaluation in extension in Albury on November 30 and December 1 1995. It was attended by 69 people from around Australia and Steve Howse from New Zealand.

The workshop committee's evaluation showed that the majority of participants found the workshop quite useful, with many participants making very positive individual comments in answer to the question of what they got from the workshop. The networking with old acquaintances and the making of new ones was also a highlight.

The interim committee was very satisfied with the result of its combined first annual general meeting and workshop and believes that it was a significant event that could become a format for future annual general meetings.

**First Annual General Meeting**  
The annual general meeting held at the end of the first day of the workshop attracted 44 people and the new Committee of Management team was elected.

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The new team is:

**Terry Makin**, the past interim chairman as **President**,

**Peter Davies** (Conservation and Lands, Deniliquin NSW), as **Vice President**,

**Jane Fisher** (Tasmania Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries), as **Secretary**,

**Warren Straw** (Agriculture Victoria, Melbourne) is **Treasurer**,

**Dale Williams** (University of Western Sydney) has taken responsibility for the **Editor's** position.

**Jo Millar** (Charles Sturt University, Albury) and **John Bourne** (CRC for Soil & Land Management, Adelaide) are the **committee members**.

(See contact addresses, phone & fax, Page 8)

After the formal elections, David Beckingsale facilitated a brainstorming session to gain some idea of the issues and directions that those present felt the committee should pursue.

I believe that the successful workshop and AGM shows that APEN is meeting members' professional needs and this is verified by our continuing membership growth.

The new Committee of Management held their first teleconference on December 18.

## AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION, A FARMER'S PERSPECTIVE

*Richard McKenna, Western Australian Grain grower*

I am a 30 year old grain grower in Western Australia's Northern Agricultural Region. I am a partner in a family business that includes my wife, brother and parents. Together we sow approximately 3300ha of crops that include wheat, lupins, chickpeas, triticale and Canola.

I consider the Agricultural Extension network available to our operation as being very good. We are able to draw information from a wide range of sources. These include the Western Australian Department of Agriculture Advisers, chemical company sales representatives, farm merchandise store agronomists, private consultants and even the researchers themselves. I do feel however, that this network is being stretched to its limits.

It seems that new technology is being produced at an ever increasing rate. The past few years has seen an explosion in the number of management options available to farmers. They include new crops, varieties, herbicides, insecticides, fungicides, fertilisers and crop establishment methods. The demands put on food production by population growth and rising living standards, combined with the ever present "cost price

squeeze", makes the rapid and continual adoption of this new technology necessary for growers to stay in business. If this "technology explosion" continues I can see that the extension sector of the industry will need to undergo some change in order to maximise the adoption of new technology by farmers as they are finding it increasingly difficult to run their farms while keeping up to date with these new developments.

The traditional off peak periods in the farmer's calendar have been saturated with field days, crop inspections, seminars, grower meetings etc. The situation has developed where farmers are sacrificing hands-on farm work in the so called quiet periods in order to attend these functions and must choose between the many events as they cannot possibly all be attended.

There are several ways in which to help alleviate this problem, such as:

- Broadcasting regional and state seminars to telecentres in local towns. This way they could be viewed by farmers locally, or at their convenience via a video cassette.
- Local seminars and field days/crop inspections could be recorded on video, and made available to farmers unable to attend on that particular day. This could be done within local farmer groups, this not requiring increased input by the extension sector.

- Quality control at extension days. While in general it is very good, there are times and speakers that could improve their standard of presentation. The main areas where improvement is sometimes called for is where too much unnecessarily complicated information is presented in too short a time or where a speaker labours too long on a subject of little interest to the audience.

- It appears that most of the extension professionals have little or no training in extension. Perhaps there should be more opportunities in the educational institutions for students to specialise in Agricultural Extension.

In closing, I must say that I find the people I deal with in the research and extension sectors of the industry to be very dedicated and highly motivated.

The good working relationships that exist between farmers, advisers and researchers has produced an industry that will continue to meet challenges as they arise. I look forward to the future.

## How Much do Horticulturalists use the Government Extension Service?

*Francis Smit, Muresk Institute of Agriculture*  
*Matt Darcey, Department of Agriculture, Western Australia*



*Matt Darcey*

The Department of Agriculture has, in recent times become increasingly involved in working with grower groups and less with customers on an individual basis. The role of the Department in these groups has been to provide facilitation of group development. Thirty-six per cent of Carnarvon horticulturalists are members of seven operative marketing, crop improvement or business management growers groups. A number of these groups have been established in the last two years. However, some criticism of the Department has arisen from producers not in groups. A survey of growers was then done with the objective to assess the

effectiveness of extension services currently supplied by the Department of Agriculture in Carnarvon, WA.

Thirty per cent of Carnarvon plantations were randomly selected and surveyed by personal interview on their plantation between July 7 and 13 1995. The survey was tested on five plantation owners. In total 48 respondents were interviewed (30.6% of active Carnarvon plantations). Growers were asked their views on the current direction of the Department's extension services, how they might be improved and what services might be required to meet future needs of growers in the Gascoyne.

The major findings of the survey were:

- 79% of respondents use the Department's advisory service.
- 42% of these on average use the service at least quarterly.
- 38% of enquires related to pest, disease and chemical information.
- 28% of enquires related to crop and soil management.
- 83% of growers in groups are gaining benefits from those groups.
- 60% of growers not in groups indicated that they will or might join groups in the future.
- 77% of growers not in groups thought that increasing group work by the Department of Agriculture was a good idea.
- 94% of growers read the Department of Agriculture's quarterly horticultural

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information publication  
*Riverag*.

- 69% of growers would use a grower resource centre at night (up to 83% if it was also open during the day).
- 32% of suggested improvements to the advisory service related to the provision of more information.

The extension survey has provided Carnarvon horticulturists with a mechanism to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with the current direction taken by the Department of Agriculture, in turn providing the Department with valuable feedback. The results confirm wide usage of the Department's advisory service, an acceptance of the current direction taken by the Department and an indication of growers' future information requirements. Information transfer through group work, the *Riverag* and the establishment of a grower resource centre will maximise the efficiency and effectiveness of the Department of Agriculture's advisory services to their customers.

## Extension networks and information systems in WA

*Sue Bestow, Geraldton, Western Australia*

Agriculture Western Australia is part of a wider network of information providers that work in the state. These include other government agencies, marketing bodies and private firms.

Collectively the extension workers within these organisations, have, as part of their aims, a common thread in the achievement of sustainable agricultural production across the region. The reasons for pursuing this are, of course, different between players.

Increasingly, Australian agriculture is operating within an Agricultural Knowledge and Information System (AKIS). This is seen as the set of organisations and people, and the interactions between them that deal with agricultural knowledge and information. They potentially work synergistically to support decision making in agriculture.

Close integration of the elements of the AKIS is needed if the players are to realise their combined potential. We are seeing an increasing complexity of the knowledge systems which reduces the direct importance of government extension officers. They can take one of two paths, either they become managers of the system, their work therefore becoming more pivotal, or they can be overtaken and reduced to a minor role in a system dominated by private interests. This will depend on the choices of the public service policy makers.

In the past five years there have been several significant changes that have impacted on the information services available to growers. These changes, which are likely to continue, are:

A. Some significant changes to the industry

- The cost price squeeze getting tighter and product quality becoming more important.
- The concept of sustainability has entered more strongly into the farming equation.

B. Changes to government agencies

- Reduction in the overall Government extension services.
- Changes in method of extension, reducing the one to one reactive extension and increasing the proactive, market driven, group extension work.
- Government has become a giver of more specialist advice.
- Increasing use of high technology to deliver information.

C. Changes to private sector

- Increase in the number and level of activity of farm consultants.
- More crop protection products on the market.
- More competitive market place for product sales.
- Resellers are adding product and agronomic advice to the service they provide.

In comparison to five years ago, growers now have a greatly expanded choice of information sources. Consequently, it is possible to interpret these changes as a general lift from a typical linear extension model to a genuine AKIS with many players, knowledge seekers and information sources.