

RMPP ACTION NETWORK FINAL REPORT

POSITIVE CHANGE USING SMALL GROUP LEARNING

COMMENTS FROM ACTION GROUP FARMERS

"Farmers are so focused on what they are doing that they don't see what is going on outside the farm gate a lot of the time. It's good to pick up new ideas, they keep you interested."

FARMER, SOUTHLAND ACTION GROUP

"Our farm has been in a discussion group for the last twenty years and we are finding we are getting a lot more from this new Action Group."

FARMER, SOUTH CANTERBURY
ACTION GROUP

"We have a really good facilitator who adds enthusiasm and a vibe to the group. He gets us going and everyone is now behind the group."

FARMER, MANAWATU-WHANGANUI ACTION GROUP

"The group has been bloody wonderful. 95 out of 100." FARMER, NORTHLAND ACTION GROUP "The Action Group has blown me away." FARMER, NORTHLAND

ACTION GROUP

"We feel we understand a lot more about pasture management and quality versus quantity, and how we can improve that side of things."



RMPP Action Network Final Report, September 2020

Authors: Brendon Patchett, Denise Bewsell (Red Meat Profit Partnership) and Joanna Grigg

The Red Meat Profit Partnership is a Primary Growth Partnership programme funded by the Ministry for Primary Industries, Beef + Lamb New Zealand, ANZ Bank, Rabobank, Alliance Group, ANZCO, Blue Sky Meats, Greenlea Premier Meats, Progressive Meats and Silver Fern Farms.

The RMPP Action Network was developed in conjunction with the Red Meat Profit Partnership programme.

Note: farmer quotes have been used throughout this final report. Some quotes used have not been attributed to a particular farmer, this is because the quote has been received by RMPP Action Network anonymously.

CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	4
1. DEVELOPING RMPP ACTION NETWORK	6
1.1 The Extension Model	6
1.2 Extension Pilot Programme	7
1.3 RMPP Action Network Launched	9
2. ROLLING IT OUT	11
2.1 Steps to an RMPP Action Group	11
2.2 Key Roles and Functions	11
2.3 Engaging and Supporting Action Groups	15
3. EVALUATING ACTION NETWORK	19
3.1 Bennett's Hierarchy Model as a Framework to Evaluate	19
3.2 Impact of RMPP Action Network	22
4. THE X-FACTORS	33
4.1 What makes RMPP Action Network Successful?	33
5. LETTING IT FLY	36
5.1 Key Considerations for the Endurance of Existing Action Groups	37
5.2 Use the Principles of Action Network as a Base to Carry Forward	38
6. APPENDIX	39

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



The objective $---\rightarrow$

Develop farmer confidence, increasing the rate of change to turn more great ideas into action, to improve the sector's productivity and profitability

A successful Action Group is one that has a highly skilled facilitator that supports and manages the group to achieve their goals, a common group focus, good use of supporting Red Meat Profit Partnership (RMPP) Action Network resources and draws on subject matter expert specialist knowledge. It has a culture that welcomes change and supports the growth of farmer confidence. These key principles to success are the legacy of RMPP Action Network.

The concept of well-supported, small group learning came from the RMPP Extension Research (2014-2015). Lack of confidence was identified to be a significant factor preventing farmers working towards and making changes on-farm. This was largely due to a lack of adoption support and follow-up. RMPP Action Network, using small group-based learning, provided a platform that encouraged a trusted and supportive environment for farmers to develop the confidence to take-action and be accountable to make change within their farm business. The RMPP Action Network was launched in 2017.

Approximately 17% of sheep and beef farmers have been involved in an Action Group, leading to significant beneficial change to the productivity, profitability and sustainability of many of the farm businesses involved and, a positive spill over to the wider sheep and beef industry.

Independent research evaluating the economic benefits of the RMPP Action Network was completed by Scarlatti Limited (Scarlatti)¹ in June 2020 (the research was commissioned by RMPP). The research found that the investment of \$14.4 million² into RMPP Action Network generated benefits with a present value (PV) of \$381 million or 26:1

The average net benefit received by farms participating in the RMPP Action Network is estimated to grow to \$24 per hectare (\$17,712 for an average-sized farm) per annum. It may take a farm up to eight years to fully realise these benefits from the start of its participation in an Action Group.

Interviews by UMR Research (UMR) with thirty farmers involved in Action Groups³ revealed that most were overwhelmingly positive about the experience. Farmers valued other group members ahead of facilitators but valued facilitators for sourcing subject matter experts, bringing structure and meeting the needs of the group. The combination of these factors and the group dynamic help to build confidence leading to sustainable farm business improvements. Lower ratings for the experience were given when facilitators did not achieve this balance.

The average net gain in EBITRm (earnings before interest, tax, rent and wages of management) across fourteen evaluated case studies, completed by BakerAg, was \$116 per hectare per annum.⁴ This is considered conservative because, for most, the evaluation addressed a short impact period of only twelve to eighteen months involvement in the programme. Farmer members attributed 55% of these gains to participation in an Action Group. The values ranged from 20% to 100%.

In focusing on this small group approach RMPP Action Network has offered a step change for the sector.

- 1. Evaluation of the Impact of the Red Meat Profit Partnership, Scarlatti Limited, lune 2020
- 2. The \$14.4 million comprises Red Meat Profit Partnership investment in Extension Design research and the rollout of the RMPP Action Network
- 3. $\it RMPP Action Network Evaluation Stories from the Regions, UMR Research, July 2020$
- 4. Measuring the Impact of RMPP's Action Network, BakerAg, May 2020

The pathway to creating RMPP Action Network

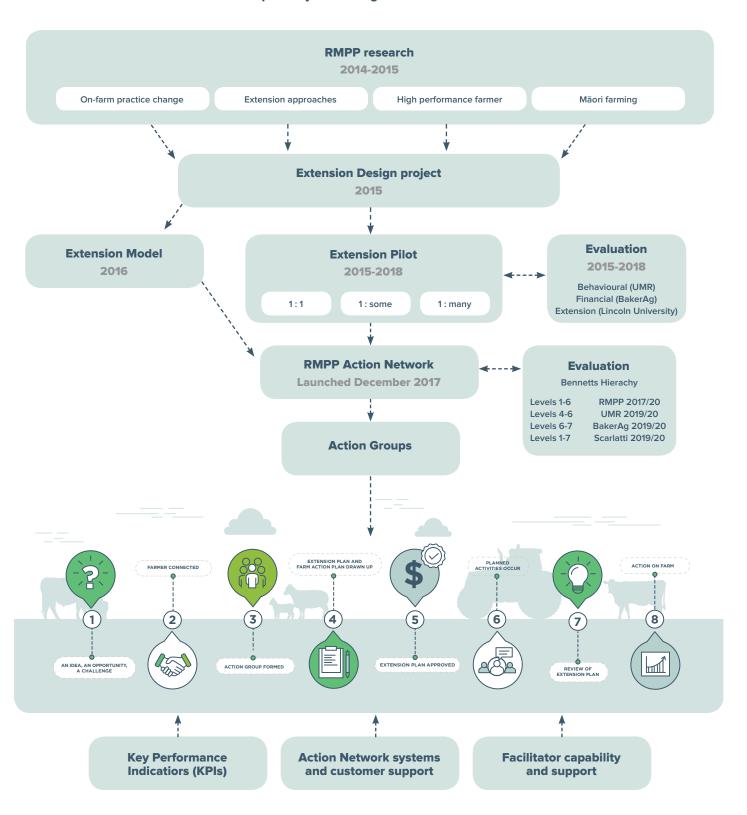


Figure A: the pathway to creating RMPP Action Network with the stages of research, extension design and pilots, evaluations and rollout, 2014-2020

1. DEVELOPING RMPP ACTION NETWORK

RMPP Action Network is a small group learning and support extension approach, established for the red meat sector. It involves connecting like-minded farmers into Action Groups of seven to nine farm businesses with clear steps to making positive changes in their chosen area of interest. Connections and engagement between participants are at the heart of it.

This extension approach was driven by the Extension Design project¹ and other research from the Red Meat Profit Partnership (Figure B).

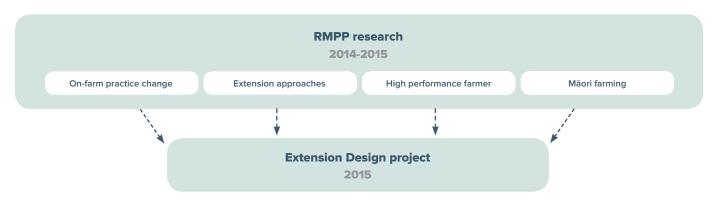


Figure B: RMPP initial research phase leading to Extension Design project (for full diagram see page 5)

The initial work involved research by UMR on high-performance farmers, on-farm practice change and Māori farming, along with a review of existing extension approaches by AgResearch.²

An Extension Design project (mid-2015 to 2018) evolved from this and developed an Extension Model as part of a coordinated national extension and uptake framework.

1.1 The Extension Model

The research identified that connecting with the farm team is central to successful change. The farm team is the team that drives decision making. It could be husband/wife, partnership of family members, manager/owner, corporate farm team or board member/farm manager (whatever is relevant to the business).

The model places the farm team at the centre (Figure C).3

The Extension Model lists four key aspects considered to be vital to an effective extension programme. They are:

- Information resources (including digital, hard copy), for example, the B+LNZ Knowledge Hub.4 This hub is a fully searchable web-based resource centre with more than 400 videos, podcasts, fact sheets, resource books, user guides and learning modules.
- Activities providing opportunities to learn about a subject. For example, workshop, field day or smallgroup learning.

- Adoption support, in particular follow-up support on-farm. This could be mentoring, webinars, one-toone coaching, or discussion with a group of peers.
- Recognition of different roles (see Figure C below and page 11).

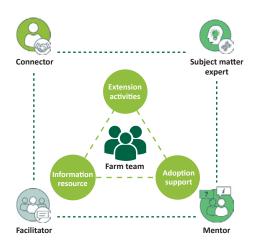


Figure C: the Extension Model, with the farm team central, became the basis for RMPP Action Network

1.2 Extension Pilot Programme



Figure D: Extension Pilot phase and the evaluations (for full diagram see page 5)

The Extension Design project designed and ran an Extension Pilot (2015-2018) to test three different ways of working with farmers.

The Extension Pilot was run to test the success of three different models of engagement with farmers (Figure D). These models differ in their demand on extension resources and hence have significant infrastructure, time and cost implications. The approaches were:

- One-to-many farm businesses (large group)
- One-to-some farm businesses (small group)
- One-to-one farm business.

The first two are group-based extension; the third individually based extension. They were all evaluated by independent research.⁵ All three worked, although there were pros and cons to each. One-to-one, individually based extension, had higher time input and costs. Large groups offered less direct support to farmers. The pilot scheme focus was chiefly on understanding red meat sector farmers better and determining their preferred way to learn and the small group approach was seen as a significant gap for the sector.

The one-to-many pilot was tested with RMPP's two partner banks, ANZ and Rabobank. It focused on farm business accountability structures for financial management and governance. This approach was rejected for the national extension rollout for two reasons. The first was that the sector was very good at these types of extension activities and more activities in this space were not needed. The second was that typically there is less engagement and interaction in larger groups.

The other two pilots, one-to-one (individually focused) and one-to-some (small group focused) were arranged by RMPP's meat processing partners.

In total, 75 farm businesses and five meat processor partners (Alliance Group, ANZCO, Blue Sky Meats, Greenlea Premier Meats, Progressive Meats and Silver Fern Farms) were involved.

Each meat processor company approached the Extension Pilot slightly differently. The one-to-one approach was also rejected for the national extension rollout because of the cost and resources required.

Examples of Extension Pilot small groups

Alliance set up a young farmers' group made up of five farm businesses located in Southland. Regular workshops were held covering a range of topics. The information resource to engage this group was their lamb processing data sheet. Each business was benchmarked in terms of their lamb production performance against a larger group of farms and that of a respected high performing farmer.

ANZCO ran a group focused on farm systems, using field trips as a key focus. In this group, farmers visited high performing farms outside their region. Topics included feed planning and stock management (emphasising body condition scoring). There was 'homework' where farmers were asked to reflect on key points that had stood out for them, and steps to change on their farm. This ensured the trip was not just an extension activity providing some information resources, but also helped participants identify any next steps for their business.

^{1.} RMPP Extension Design Project Final Report, Denise Bewsell, Tony Brenton-Rule, Red Meat Profit Partnership, October 2019

^{2.} Sheep and Beef Farmer Segmentation Final Report, UMR Research, December 2014. Informing Extension Pilot Project Design James Turner, Tracy Payne and Kelly Rijswijk, AgResearch, October 2014, Top Farmer Qualitative Report, UMR Research, November 2014. RMPP Māori Farming Qualitative Report, UMR Research, 2014

^{3.} For a full animated description of the model see the video link in the Appendix on page 39

^{4.} B+LNZ Knowledge Hub: beeflambnz.com/knowledge-hub

^{5.} Research was commissioned by RMPP and carried out by UMR Research, BakerAg and Agribusiness and Economics Research Unit, Lincoln University

Impact of pilot programme

In-depth evaluations were done on the farm businesses involved.

Practice change: The proportion of participating farmers reporting on-farm practice change was 58% when the project began in 2015. This increased to and remained relatively constant at a high level of between 80% to 90% for the remaining three years of the pilot.

Speed of practice change: Practice changes were implemented between one and a half and two years sooner because of participation in the pilot. This was assessed as part of a telephone survey (part of the evaluation by Lincoln University).

Areas of practice change: Changes were made across a wide range of areas. The most frequently reported were in monitoring and recording, new forages and livestock management.

Motivators: Access to independent experts and the group dynamic were the most important motivators or aspects that assisted farmers to implement on-farm change.

The Extension Pilot programme showed that successful change happened when farmers connected with other farmers in small groups, had shared goals and had access to expert information, advice and ongoing-support.

Successful changes included improved production, profitability and sustainability, as well as changes in farm management.

Financial outcomes from successful on-farm practice change often take time to be seen because of the seasonal nature of pastoral farming and the time before each new generation of livestock become productive.

However, even at the third year of the extension pilot, four of the eleven farmer case studies showed an improvement in EBITRm of between \$15 and \$235 per effective hectare per year.

For the other seven case studies where EBITRm was unable to be used as a measure of change, there was an improvement of between \$7 and \$137/ha.6

The on-farm results of the pilot scheme are recorded in the Trial Farmer Booklet.7

The pilot evaluations resulted in the Action Group model being conceived and loosely based on the one-to-some approach. The strong peer-to-peer element of how Action Groups work differentiates them from previous extension models.

WHAT IT SHOWED ABOUT SIZE

The most effective way to learn and make practice change, plus the most cost-effective for RMPP, was 'one-to-some' i.e. small group learning.

Within this small group, research showed six farm businesses or fewer was too small, given that sometimes a farm business drops out. The ideal starting size is seven to nine farm businesses.

WHAT IT SHOWED ABOUT THE APPROACH

Through the Extension Pilot, RMPP gained a better understanding of the approaches that are most effective in supporting practice change.

For a small group extension approach to be successful, offering continual support and expertise, combined with peer encouragement, is necessary.

> 80-90% **OF PILOT FARMERS REPORTED POSITIVE CHANGE IN THEIR FARM PRACTICES BY** YEAR TWO

^{6.} Using a standardised cost/benefit measure and controlling for variation in the prices obtained for farm products

^{7.} www.rmpp.co.nz and www.actionnetwork.co.nz

1.3 RMPP Action Network Launched

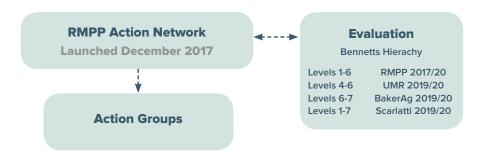


Figure E: RMPP Action Network rollout phase (for full diagram see page 5)

Action Groups were rolled out to red meat farmers from late 2017 (Figure E).

The programme became known as the RMPP Action Network because it embodies a network of connection and collaboration that enables and leads to action on-farm.

Connect, act, profit was adopted as the tag line.

Over the 35 months to September 2020, 216 Action Groups formed, involving over 1,850 farm businesses. Those involved in the RMPP Action Network programme needed support to make it work.

At this point the systems and customer support team was created within RMPP to help farmers and rural professionals engage, connect and run groups. Significant investment was also put into people capability (i.e. facilitator training and support).

Data systems were developed to standardise business indicators, Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for sheep and beef farms were agreed and published, the publication titled A Core Set of KPI Measures for Red Meat Farming Businesses; available in hard copy form or online via the B+LNZ Knowledge Hub.

These activities fed into the RMPP Action Group process and are discussed in more detail in Section 2 of this report.

Where RMPP Action Network fits with wider extension methods

Extension work can go across a continuum of audience sizes, from one-on-one, to mass media and large field days (Figure F).

RMPP Action Network however provides support through peer to peer interactions within small groups to help achieve action on-farm.



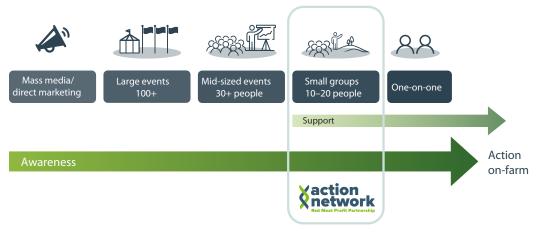


Figure F: the focus for RMPP Action Network is to work with a small group of between 10-20 people

Key principles

In summary, these key principles were carried through from the research and pilot programme underpinning **RMPP Action Network:**

- · Involve the farm team to allow for continued discussion, learning and support beyond group activities.
- Group size of seven to nine farm businesses allows effective learning. As farm team/partner involvement is encouraged, the total number of people involved shouldn't exceed eighteen to twenty people.
- Effective and enduring Action Groups are farmer focused and allow for flexibility to adjust and adapt to situations over time i.e. form around a common focus.
- Provide a medium for farmers to learn from and share with other farmers, by providing well-trained skilled facilitators. They encourage an inclusive environment allowing collective responsibility to support farmers take action on-farm.
- Provide access to subject matter experts* as it suits the needs of the group.
 - * see page thirteen for more information on subject matter experts



Growth and Development in Farming Action Group, North Otago

2. ROLLING IT OUT

This section outlines the process and the roles within and around an Action Group.

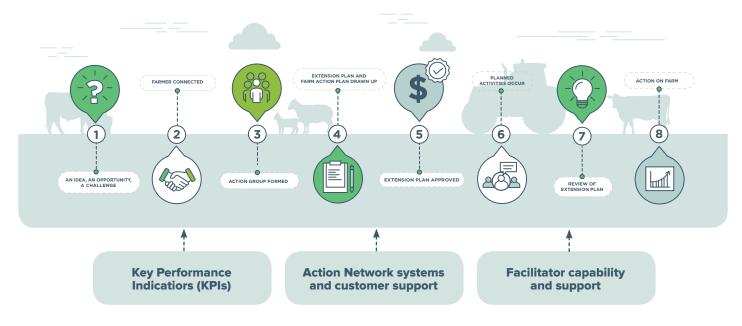


Figure G: eight steps to a fully operational Action Group

2.1 Steps to an RMPP Action Group

Figure G illustrates the stages of connecting, forming and running an Action Group. It also shows the support feeding in from three key parallel RMPP projects.

During the early stages of rollout, the emphasis was on understanding how to connect and establish Action Groups. Over time the focus swung to supporting farmers to develop meaningful Farm Action Plans and supporting facilitators to deal with the ebbs and flows of a small group lifecycle and culture.

A strength of the programme has been the ability of the approach to cater for the varying needs of farmers and groups.

Over the course of a year, farmer group members progress through eight steps:

- Farmers identify an idea, opportunity, or challenge.
- Farmers connect with other like-minded farmers. They do this with support from connectors and facilitators.
- Action Group formed (seven to nine farm businesses) around a topic or idea to address an on-farm issue, facilitator appointed.

- 4. An Extension Plan is developed listing objectives and goals for the group and an activity timeline and budget. A Farm Action Plan is drawn up for each farm business, with goals, objectives and actions.
- Extension and Farm Action Plans are reviewed and approved by RMPP.
- Planned activities occur, for example, workshop, farm walk with subject matter experts.
- 7. Review and refinement of plans.
- 8. Action adopted on-farm.

The RMPP Action Network Handbook, A Guide to Help Connect, Form and Facilitate an Action Group outlines the key requirements and steps, it also underpinned some of the Action Network Fundamentals and Extension Design training, see Appendix on page 39.

2.2 Key Roles and Functions

There are key roles (or jobs) within the process that were defined, developed and supported with training and resources.

These roles are connector, facilitator, Action Group member, primary contact farmer, subject matter expert and mentor.



Connector

Connectors are people who understand individual farmers' needs, may spark farmers' ideas, and link them with like-minded farmers to form an Action Group. Connectors for RMPP Action Network are typically rural

professionals such as a banker, accountant, veterinarian or other type of advisor. Anyone can play a connecting role. Connectors approach farmers that they know, or are connected to, through agribusiness or social contacts.

There are various approaches to connecting farmers with other farmers. Some of the most successful groups formed with a number of connectors working together, casting the net wider and bringing a larger number of farmers together to explore opportunities, in a facilitated setting. From these larger meetings, farmers identified a particular focus they'd like to pursue, for example, financial performance, catchment enhancement and forage systems.

The connector role was not funded. In some cases, connectors went on to become the facilitator or acted as a subject matter expert for the group.

Connectors have always existed in agribusiness but, through RMPP outreach, many rural professionals were formally approached and encouraged to learn more about the RMPP Action Network approach. They were asked to encourage farmers to form Action Groups, this included farmers on B+LNZ Farmer Councils. RMPP partners played a role in connecting many of the earlier formed Action Groups.

B+LNZ Extension Managers also supported connectors regionally, raising awareness of the RMPP Action Network and encouraging them to undertake the RMPP Action Network training, and to then support farmers connecting with an Action Group.

The duration of support shown by connectors to their group varied. Some connectors stayed on with the group, others put farmers in touch then stepped back.

Some rural professionals placed their clients into an Action Group without fully considering their needs and possibilities. These tended to be the Action Groups that failed to help group members understand the relevance to them and struggled with continued farmer engagement as they didn't have a shared topic or focus.

Not all action Groups are geographically based. Connections can be made nationally, for example, two national Action Groups were formed. These were made up of farm businesses across New Zealand, meeting physically and online.

The Connector Tool Kit was developed as the key resource for the role, see Appendix on page 39.



Facilitator

The facilitator of the Action Group is critical for its success. They help the group form and work together. They run activities on behalf of the group, help develop extension plans, source resources and

work with the group to manage the budget. They help source and manage subject matter experts. They play an important role in enabling a supportive and safe environment that allows for effective sharing and learning to occur and the development of trust and confidence over time.

They facilitate conversations and sharing of experiences and ideas. They are responsible for helping farmer members hold each other to account.

To become an RMPP facilitator two training workshops had to be completed:

- Lead Facilitator
- Action Network Fundamentals and Extension Design.

See Appendix on page 39 for workshop details.

Each facilitator had to be observed facilitating a group, to show they are using the tools taught in the workshops.

The workshops explain what facilitation is all about, teaches skills to effectively facilitate adult learning and how to work with farmers to help them build the confidence they need to increase practice change on-farm through supportive small group environments.

A Facilitator Role Description was created and included a code of ethics and a development plan, see Appendix on page 39.

Over 600 rural professionals undertook one or both of the facilitation workshops. Those that became Action Group facilitators came from different backgrounds such as farm consultants, veterinarians, environmental consultants and farmers.

RMPP focused on building support around facilitators to encourage them to connect and learn from each other. More details are covered on page 16 of this report.

"The success of RMPP Action Network to improve profitability and noneconomic benefits is directly related to the quality of facilitation."





Action Group member

To be eligible to join an Action Group a farmer must own/manage a red meat farm. Up to \$4,000 (exclusive of GST) was allocated per farm business to pay for approved group activities. In August 2020

the amount allocated per farm business was adjusted to up to \$2,000 reflecting the limited time left in the programme.

Farmers commit to completing a Farm Action Plan, calculating two or three KPIs and completing evaluation surveys every six months. At formation, members agree their group objective and goals, some initial activities and their ground rules, for example, confidentiality.

Initially there was an expectation for each member in the group to contribute \$800 at the end of the first year. This contribution was removed in late 2018.

Dairy farmers were permitted to join and receive funding if part of an Action Group that had an environmental or water catchment focus, or a focus on the beef value chain.

Primary contact farmer

The primary contact must be member of the Action



Group and is appointed to this role by its members. The role has evolved to be the main contact point with the facilitator and RMPP. They are responsible for working with the facilitator to develop and submit the Extension Plan on behalf of the group,

to validate that activities are completed to expectation and to approve group invoices.

Anecdotal feedback indicates that this role plays an important part within the group, in particular gauging satisfaction and concerns, supporting engagement and helping other members develop Farm Action Plans.

The role can be involved and time consuming and to spread the load some groups have rotated this responsibility. Other feedback has suggested that character fit for the role is important to consider.

> **THERE** IS NO **ONE WAY OR RIGHT WAY TO CONNECT AN** ACTION **GROUP**

The separation of the facilitator and subject matter expert roles is a fundamental aspect of RMPP Action Groups and marks a cultural shift.

In traditional extension exercises (for example, field days and discussion groups) the day is typically led by someone who fills both roles.

This shift has been challenging for some rural professionals and farmers, and the role they are performing has not always been made clear.



Subject matter expert

Subject matter experts contribute specialist advice and information through extension activities.

A group may bring in different subject matter experts to meet information or support needs over time. What is important is getting the right expertise for the issue

Facilitation and subject matter expert roles were separated, allowing facilitators to focus on group dynamics and engagement, and ensuring subject matter experts focus on the delivery of their subject matter.



Mentor

Mentors have a particular role supporting farmers build the confidence as they take action to make changes on-farm. Mentors can be experienced farmers, consultants and other rural professionals or peers.

This role received less focus within the model although mentoring occurring informally was acknowledged within groups. Feedback suggests group members are connecting with other group members and/or with experts.

Creating an Extension Plan



Figure H: developing a meaningful Extension Plan

Once the group has decided on their common focus, it creates an Extension Plan listing their activities for the year. This is submitted by the primary contact farmer to RMPP for approval and commitment of funding.

The facilitator plays an important role in guiding the Action Group through developing a relevant and meaningful plan (Figure H), that addresses what they want to achieve as a group.

Once developed, the Extension Plan is by no means 'set in stone.' Extension Plans can be changed so that the activities and goals remain relevant to the group's approved objective.

It is reviewed at the end of twelve months to encourage reflection and to ensure the group focus remains relevant. The new Extension Plan for the next year is submitted to RMPP for approval.

Creating Farm Action Plans

Each farm team creates a Farm Action Plan in order to meet its objectives. This looks a year ahead and should be done within three months of the group Extension Plan being approved.

The farm business goals should relate to one or more of the Extension Plan goals. These will reflect what the farm business wants to achieve from participating in the RMPP Action Group (Figure I). Farmers that thought about Farm Action Plans at the start of the process, in particular their farm business goals, made the Extension Plan activities focused on meeting their goals.

Farm Action Plans were originally only able to be completed online. A year into the programme, because of the low completion rates of Farm Action Plans driven by internet connectivity limitations or farmer confidence completing online Farm Action Plans, a hard copy version was accepted. This was filled in, scanned and lodged with RMPP.

Farm Action Plan completion rates were low and as a result RMPP suspended funding for any Action Group members who did not complete their Farm Action Plan by the required date. This approach led to an increase in completion rates and funding suspensions were reversed once plans were submitted.

Feedback to RMPP was that the barriers to completing Farm Action Plans were:

- Calculating KPIs was new to many farmers
- Concern that results would show performance was lower than their peers
- Unease that the results would be shared publicly
- Farm Action Plans were unfamiliar to facilitators, resulting in issues communicating the process and value to farmers.

These issues are further discussed on pages 36-38.



Within three months of first meeting

IN SEPTEMBER 2020, 80% OF FARMERS HAD **COMPLETED THEIR FARM ACTION PLANS AND 4% WERE ALMOST** COMPLETE

> 40% OF **ACTION GROUPS HAD ALL MEMBERS COMPLETE A FARM ACTION PLAN**

17% HAD NOT STARTED THE **PROCESS**

Calculating Key Performance Indicators

At the start of the programme it was determined that, to receive funding, farmers must calculate and record two of the following three KPIs:

- EBITRm per Effective Hectare
- Farm Operating Expenditure (FOE) Ratio
- Net Production per Effective Hectare.

These three KPIs were chosen because farm performance cannot be effectively monitored if it cannot be measured.

The chosen KPIs were just three of the ten standardised KPIs developed by RMPP. In parallel with this, the RMPP Core Set of KPI Measures for Red Meat Sector Farming Businesses booklet was published, see Appendix on page 39, and online calculators developed.

One advantage of using standardized KPIs was that members could benchmark performance between farm types and regionally by using online tools available on the B+LNZ website.

Action Plan support

To help explain how to calculate and use KPIs, Action Groups were given the opportunity to do a four-hour workshop called Taking Ownership of Your Financials, see Appendix on page 39. The workshop grew farmer confidence in understanding the financial performance of their business by taking them through a set of accounts and how to calculate the three KPIs required for a Farm Action Plan.

As at September 2020, 78 of the 216 Action Groups had completed this workshop.

Review of Farm Action Plan removed

The initial plan was to annually review the year's activity, then develop a new Farm Action Plan for the year ahead. At this point, KPI calculations would be re-run. However, due to the challenges outlined on page 14 and the remaining time left in the programme, it was agreed that farm businesses only needed to develop one Farm Action Plan (including KPIs) during their involvement in the programme.

Most farmers completed one Farm Action Plan with some farmers reviewing and updating annually.

2.3 Engaging and Supporting Action Groups

The importance of connections and support with farmers and rural professionals, to allow on-farm change, was recognised early in the programme. RMPP Action Network directed resources into encouraging and strengthening connections and supporting small group learning good practice.

Stakeholder Engagement

RMPP established a Stakeholder Engagement Manager role to engage with partners and other sector organisations to drive awareness and understanding of RMPP Action Network and the forming of Action Groups.

B+LNZ was engaged in February 2018 to deliver rural professional engagement and provide more breadth and leverage to support uptake.

Where appropriate, rural professionals were encouraged to train as facilitators. If they were not interested in being an Action Group facilitator, they were encouraged to attend the training to increase their understanding of small group learning and support.

The broader RMPP programme became a pathway to joining Action Groups. Over 400 women who completed the Understanding Your Farming Business programme (adwt. org.nz/programmes), run by the Agri-women's Development Trust (in partnership with RMPP), became involved in Action Groups.

Facilitator support

Three levels of review/feedback were provided to facilitators. These were a compulsory requirement to be paid as an Action Group facilitator. These were:

- An observation
- A reflection on an event (application story)
- 360° review.

Four observer/coaches were recruited to observe facilitators working with their Action Group and give feedback. This provided some indication of any follow-up training or support that might be needed.

Within three months of completing the Lead Facilitator workshop, facilitators reviewed one of the events they facilitated (known as an Application Story).

Twelve months post-Action Group establishment, facilitators participated in a 360° interview that included reflections, feedback received from the farmers, and from subject matter experts who had attended group meetings.

As at September 2020 there were 94 active and 134 approved facilitators.

The review/feedback process was well received by facilitators.

The level of review to provide good insights and support requires dedicated resourcing.

Action Hubs

In June 2018 Action Hubs were created for facilitators. These followed the B+LNZ extension areas so were aligned regionally. Action Hub meetings are designed to bring facilitators together to share experiences, top-up knowledge, build supportive connections and to aid the development of facilitation capability.

These sessions were challenging for a number of reasons but mostly due to the distance to travel, and work load for rural professionals. Geographical spread in the earlier stages of the programme also made selecting locations and attracting ideal participation challenging. Several Action Hubs were run online to try and mitigate these attendance barriers with some success.

Some of the attendees were more focused on creating groups through connecting with other rural professionals. While this was useful for forming

Action Groups, it detracted from the Action Hub purpose of upskilling facilitators in facilitation skills.

Rural Professional Action Groups

In an addition to the RMPP Action Network, and as part of trialling extra support for facilitators, seven Rural Professional Action Groups were formed. Younger rural professionals were targeted at first, with more experienced rural professionals getting involved when it was clear there was demand for this type of support. Rural Professional Action Group members contribute \$500 while RMPP provides up to \$2,000 per rural professional to pay for approved group activities.



Soil Carbon Builders Action Group, South West Otago

Webinars

In winter 2019, webinar on-line training sessions for facilitators started. Expert speakers shared advice on a range of topics including facilitation tips, ways of engaging farmers to develop Action Plans and working out KPIs. Facilitators were encouraged to share experiences, challenges and ideas amongst themselves.

These were popular due to convenience and the inability to travel due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions in place in New Zealand.

Facilitators of Change e-Forum

During winter 2020 the successful Facilitators of Change e-Forum was held, providing the opportunity for additional training. This involved eight sessions spread across seven weeks, covering a range of topics related to facilitating small groups and addressing what facilitation support might look like for rural professionals into the future.

Online training, meeting sessions and networking were consolidated during the COVID-19 lockdown, with a big shift towards uptake among facilitators and Action Groups.

Online platforms have potential to be a useful complement to, although not totally replacing, face-to-face small group learning.

Action Network customer support

The RMPP customer support function was created in January 2018. It was designed to support farmers, facilitators and subject matter experts with connecting groups, and technical systems support such as over-thephone completion of Farm Action Plans. This overcame administration and reporting being a roadblock to progress.

With its value recognised, a second support role was added in September 2018.

This was invaluable as it allowed more targeted support and drove specific objectives such as promoting and attracting rural professionals to regional Action Hubs and other facilitator support activities. Workshops such as Taking Ownership of Your Financials, were also promoted along with ongoing follow-up support.

Rural Professional and Action Group directories

To support connection within the RMPP Action Network, RMPP developed online Rural Professional and Action Group directories in 2019. These directories are database driven, dynamic, filterable and fully searchable.

The directories list group region, membership status, areas of interest, and Extension Plan objectives (if permitted by the primary contact farmer). A contact for the group can also be nominated and displayed if agreed by the individual.

The downside of this directory is that data updating is manual and centralised through the customer support team, preventing self-service updating and accuracy.

Action Network Management System

A web-based system was developed to manage participation and support. This included Action Group management, membership, and Extension and Action Plan development. It supported the important process of loading, validating and approving Action Group invoicing.

It was accessible to participants via a secure portal within the B+LNZ website, alongside other resources such as the Knowledge Hub and KPI calculators.

It was integrated with a customer relationship management database (within B+LNZ's infrastructure) to support management and automated workflows.

Action learning approach became a mantra

The RMPP team applied an action learning approach to managing the RMPP Action Network. This involved taking action, continued review/reflection, then acting and this strategy was also used during the pilot phase.

This was a very successful part of the management as it allowed the programme to adapt quickly. For example, Farm Action Plans initially had to be submitted online but, after feedback, hard copies were accepted. Connectors were initially told to make use of the network they had around their business. This proved to be too narrow for finding farmer members with a similar focus, so connectors were helped to connect beyond their business/organisation.

Promotion

To promote Action Group signup amongst farmers and rural professional the following approaches were used:

- Trusted and respected industry leaders were used to tell the story about why it is a good programme to be involved in
- Seed funding was used to encourage discussion within Action Groups about the cost of running small groups, while being affordable short-term and self-sustaining after RMPP finishes.

An advertising campaign ran in 2018/19, raising the awareness and opportunity to join/form an Action Group.

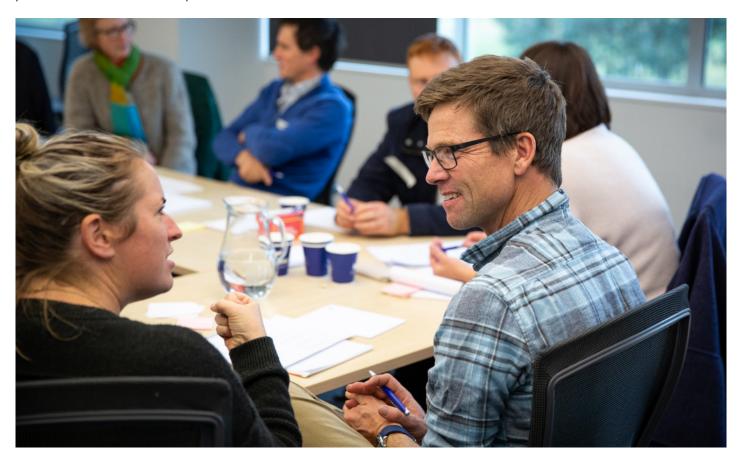
Research shows farmers typically heard about Action Groups through a rural professional, attending an event where it was promoted, via word of mouth (for example, a phone call from a connector), print media or social media.

RMPP developed a series of videos and explanatory animations to give participants a feel for the programme. They were used to explain to groups of farmers and rural professionals how Action Groups work.

In some cases, RMPP partners became directly involved in forming Action Groups. There were ten Action Groups established and facilitated by RMPP partners. These are facilitated at no cost to the group as the facilitator time is counted as an RMPP partner in-kind contribution. RMPP partners became ambassadors for RMPP Action Network.

Interactive learning module

During 2020 an interactive learning module outlining the benefits of Action Groups was produced and made available on the B+LNZ Knowledge Hub, see Appendix on page 39. The module forms part of the wider learning module resources and includes interviews with farmers outlining what they got out of Action Groups. It is also a training tool that explains small group learning to facilitators and farmers.



Nationwide Farmer Thinkers Action Group

3. EVALUATING ACTION NETWORK

This section looks at the impact of the RMPP Action Network on the group members, facilitators and the wider red meat sector.

3.1 Bennett's Hierarchy Model as a Framework to Evaluate

The impact was evaluated using a model called Bennett's Hierarchy, which measures the impacts at seven different levels.

The first three levels evaluate resource inputs including financial inputs, activities and participants involved with Action Network. Level 4 measures the reactions i.e. the response of participants to the programme.

Level 5 measures changes in knowledge, attitudes, skills and aspirations, which in turn leads to practice changes onfarm at Level 6.

The high-level impacts are seen at Level 7, which measures long-term social, economic and environmental changes resulting from participation in the RMPP Action Network.

Put together, the Bennett's Hierarchy Framework shows the chain of changes needed for transformation to occur (Figure J).

To gather the data required for these insights, RMPP contracted organisations to survey and interview participants. Modelling of current and future benefits was also commissioned. RMPP carried out surveys of participants (farmers and facilitators) every six months.

As Action Groups range in age from new to three years, many changes are just starting and will be ongoing beyond the formal end of the RMPP-managed programme. The analysis has taken this into consideration.

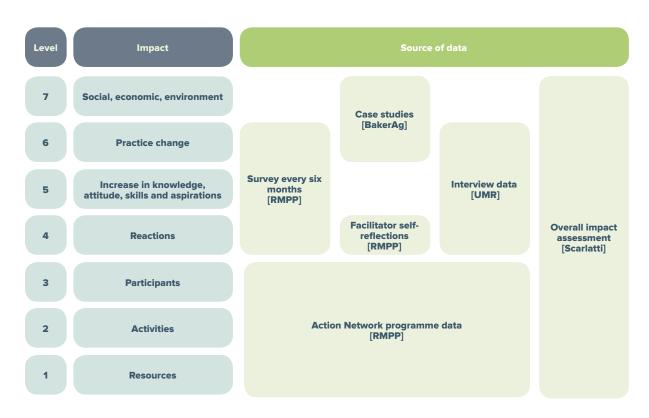


Figure J: the seven levels of Bennett's Hierarchy used to evaluate RMPP Action Network and the sources of data used in the evaluation:

Action Groups working together, sharing ideas







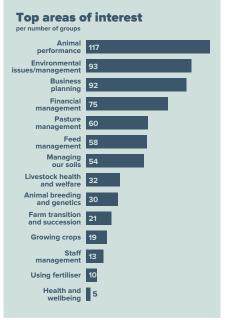






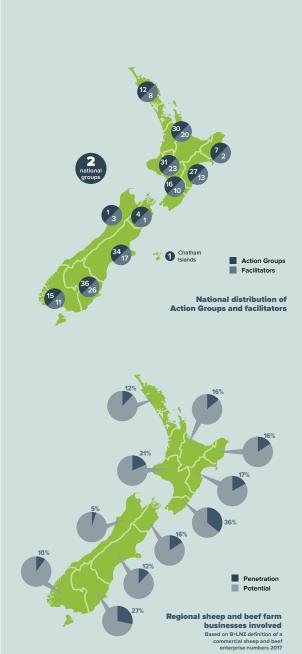
INSIGHTS

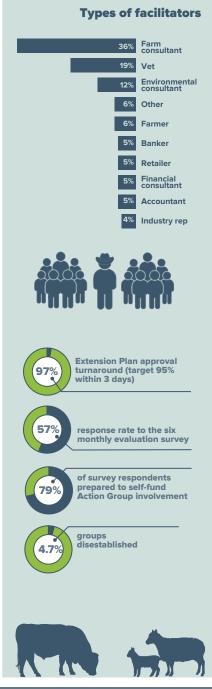
















3.2 Impact of RMPP Action Network

Level 1 to 3: Resources, activities and participants

Level 1 to 3 evaluation accounts for the money spent, the scope of extension activities and the range and number of participants.

RMPP Action Network has reached over 1,850 farm businesses and in our experience most or more than one person has been involved – in some cases there have been several people involved from a farm business. We estimate over 3,000 farmers have been directly involved in the programme.

Each Action Group farm business could claim expenses relating to undertaking activities covered by an approved Extension Plan up to a total of \$4,000 per farm business. The funds were pooled, held and administered by RMPP.

As at August 2020 ninety-one percent of Action Groups remain active while six percent have, or are in the process of, transitioning to self-funding or have met their group objective. A further three percent have disbanded for various reasons.

Fourteen percent of farm business participants have left an Action Group for various reasons, with the most common reported as lack of time, or that the group is no longer the right fit. Thirteen percent of those that have exited a group have re-joined another group. Ten percent of farm businesses wanting to be part of an Action Group, join an existing group.

"The Action Network programme has been absolutely brilliant, the best farming initative I have ever experienced, it allows farmers to invest funding where they want to invest, not where some organisaton says they should."

HAMISH BIELSKI. SOUTH OTAGO ACTION GROUP

"The RMPP funding is very good, targeted funding for farmers to use to really deep dive into the topics they want to know about." PANIA KING,

GISBORNE ACTION GROUP

THE OVERALL **FINDING IS THAT IMPACTS FOR FARMER MEMBERS HAVE BEEN** WIDE-REACHING AND **GENERALLY VERY**



Whanganui Action Group

Level 4: Reactions

This evaluation tested farmer reactions to the RMPP Action Network.

As it rolled out there was increased interest in joining an Action Group from farmers.

Reactions to involvement in the programme were tested several ways.

Data was gathered from six monthly RMPP farmer surveys, RMPP facilitator self-reflections and interviews conducted by UMR with a sample of farmers.

The reactions were generally positive as evidenced in Figure L on page 25. Most measures showed that farmers indicated moderate to strong agreement that their Action Group has positive impact on them and their farm business.

Members liked how it was strongly focussed on a topic, was farmer-led and well organised by trained facilitators. Participants viewed it as playing a critical connection role among red-meat farmers, while the ability to access expertise was a drawcard.

UMR interviews with thirty farmers

In 2020, UMR interviewed thirty farmer members to record their experiences of being in an Action Group. Ten members had taken part in the extension pilot so had been interviewed previously.

The aim of the 60-minute interviews was to understand the complex and multi-layered way that change happens on sheep and beef farms.

All farmers were asked to provide an overall rating of their Action Group. These were overwhelmingly positive:

- The average rating was 78 out of 100
- The highest rating was 100 and the lowest was 40
- The largest cluster of farmers rated their groups between 75 and 95, so 40 is considered an outlier.

Results show that farmer members who rated it highly had an Action Group that was supportive, well organised and strongly focused. Lower ratings were given when not all Action Group members could attend (and contribute) and facilitation lacked direction, and in some cases where members struggled to provide the required financial information.

The key reasons for positive reactions identified in the UMR study are:

- The combination of collective farmer experience and visiting independent experts is creating extremely fertile ground for practice change
- Facilitators bring structure to groups that help to ensure most farmers' needs are being addressed at Action Group events
- Connecting with other farmers and finding out they are also struggling can make farmers' own struggles feel less overwhelming
- Increased measurement and analysis and seeing performance improve led to renewed enthusiasm for farming
- Connecting with other experienced farmers creates confidence to change.

"Being part of the group and learning the basics about running a farm and farming business. I am enjoying this group because the people in the group are great and the facilitator is awesome. but this is not the right match of a group for us. We are a larger business and employ staff which no one else in the group does. We have a different farming landscape and farming system to everyone else. What we need to cover and discuss is not relevant to everyone else in the group." **FARMER, OTAGO ACTION GROUP**

> "One of the most beneficial side effects has been tapping into experts in New Zealand and abroad through the webinars."

> > **CHRIS ENSOR, NORTH CANTERBURY ACTION GROUP**

Chance to upskill

The evaluation included assessing the level of demand from facilitators, connectors and subject matter experts to be involved in the RMPP Action Network. Results show there was good demand from facilitators to be involved in RMPP Action Network.

As well as the potential revenue from running an Action Group, facilitators recognised the value of training and support that came with being involved.

Facilitators themselves realised their training gaps, strengths/weaknesses and have had the opportunity to address these.

The Facilitators of Change e-Forum which involved eight sessions spread across seven weeks attracted 93 participants, including 34 Action Group facilitators. A survey showed that 93% of participants valued it and said they would recommend it to others. The high performing farmer session was rated the highest. Comments reflected positively on how interactive the sessions were, and that participants got to catch up with others outside their region.

> "I joined a group as the benefits are too good to ignore... the funding, the experts." DAN COTTRELL.



Value of facilitators to farmers

Farmers have increasingly recognised the importance of good facilitation and this has driven upskilling of facilitators.

RMPP survey results showed the abilities of the facilitator are crucial to supporting change in a business.

Farmer group members have formed ongoing close relationships with facilitators.

When surveyed in June 2020, group members had increased the value they placed on support from within the group (Figure K).

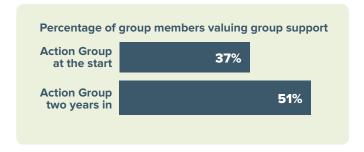


Figure K: value of support to group members, *Evaluator Survey*, June 2020

The UMR interviews with farmer members identified:

- Farmers valued other group members ahead of facilitators but valued facilitators for sourcing subject matter experts, bringing structure to the day and meeting the needs of the group
- Not all facilitators have achieved the right balance between being farmer-led while needing to lead farmers.

The RMPP survey showed that 79% of farmers surveyed said there are sufficient benefits to continuing in an Action Group post the conclusion of the programme.

An area for improvement of Action Groups, as identified in the RMPP survey, was low completion of Farm Action Plan goals, especially initially.

This low completion is likely to be related to the small-group structure (i.e. ten to twenty people). A one-on-one (i.e. individual support) session is the best way to complete an Action Plan.

One option to improve this in the future is to create time for break-out sessions where the facilitator/farm team can have a one-on-one session to help plan steps.

"When I go home from a meeting, I find I reference what I have learnt on a weekly basis. It is so important to moving our business forward."

BEN ABSOLOM. NATIONWIDE FARMER THINKERS ACTION GROUP

"RMPP funding is very good, its targeted funding for farmers to use to really deep dive into the topics they want to know about."

SEAN BENNETT. ACTION GROUP FACILITATOR

> "I found this rural professional Action Group very useful. The beauty is in having a facilitator to keep us on track and action focused. Our facilitator Richard brings a whole new skillset to the group with a different background. It's really helpful for me to see his facilitation style."

> **GENEVIEVE STEVEN.** RP BRAIDED, RURAL PROFESSIONAL **ACTION GROUP**

"I've been a facilitator at field days and seminars for a number of years as part of my farm consultancy role. I wasn't sure what value I would get out of facilitator training. However, these new workshops really challenged me to reflect on my facilitation style. I now have a number of new tools to use that will add value to the farmers' business and mine. It was a great chance to get some formal training after many years of learning on the run."

STEPHEN THOMSON. **ACTION GROUP FACILITATOR**

Level 5: Farmer skill and attitude change

The evaluation shows group members demonstrated self-reported and observed changes in knowledge, skills, attitudes and aspirations (Figure L). Knowledge is learned information or advice. Attitudes covers individuals' beliefs, opinions, feelings, or perspectives. Skills refer to the ability to use new practices. Aspirations are about vision, ambitions, hopes or objectives.

All Action Group members were asked to complete five surveys (at the start and every six months following). The survey was confidential so farmers could be free and frank.

The RMPP survey comprised a list of statements to which farmers responded, based on how much they agreed or disagreed with the statement.

The surveys recorded learning experiences over time spent in the group.

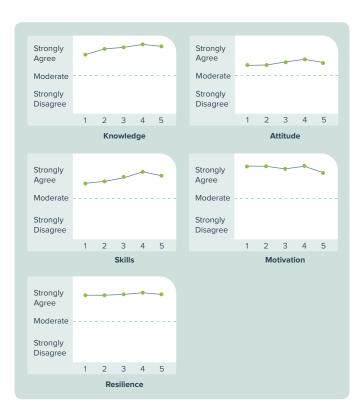


Figure L: changes over the couse of Action Network programme in farmer (group member) knowledge, skills, attitude, motivation and resilience. Six monthly RMPP survey from inception to September 2020.

Note: only the very first groups are up to their fifth survey, so this has a smaller number of respondents. Most groups are at their third or fourth survey. Typically, data trended upwards as response rates increased.

As groups move through the process, the trend has been to strengthen their positive ratings in growing skills and attitude/confidence. Knowledge has increased from survey one to four.

The survey results reveal some slight ups and downs over the life of the groups. However, the results show that most farmers agree to strongly agree that the Action Group experience has had a positive impact on their knowledge, attitude, skills, motivation and resilience.

> **OVERALL. RATINGS ARE VERY STRONG SHOWING HIGH LEVELS OF ENDORSEMENT**

The UMR Research case study interviews, of thirty group members, show four main areas that farmers have benefited from Action Groups. These results mirror the increase in self-declared knowledge and skills in the RMPP survey. These are not easily measurable using a dollar figure but they under-pin the positive economic benefits.

- Growth in knowledge
- Increased skill levels
- Stronger and wider connections
- Improved wellbeing.

"The combination of collective farmer experience and visiting independent experts is creating extremely fertile ground for practice change."

UMR

Growing knowledge

Two aspects of the way Action Groups are run stand out as directly helping grow knowledge.

- The compulsory KPI benchmarking. This is part of completing an individual Action Plan and quantifies progress for the farmer.
- Subject matter experts and follow-up support helping farmers capture, assimilate and apply technical knowledge to their business.

The facilitator is central to connecting with the right subject matter expert and bringing out in-house knowledge within the group.

GROWING KNOWLEDGE

"Our pasture quality on the hills wasn't good enough to get anything to grow. It was just a filler."

The group organised a subject matter expert on growing higher quality sub-clover species, they provided ongoing support and knowledge during establishment.

"A real positive has been the quality of the people that we've been able to get. It's given me confidence to change my system.

We sowed forty hectares of sub-clover, letting it self-seed and the results have been stunning, as good as the clover we grow on our flats.

It's a game changer. We've got 860 hectares that we're going to put straight into sub clover next vear."

FARMER, SOUTHLAND ACTION GROUP

Increased skill level

The RMPP survey showed farmers considered they had increased their business skills during their involvement with an Action Group.

INCREASED SKILLS

"We are getting a lot out of it... having the opportunity to have an expert speak on a topic is invaluable and something we would not be able to do unless we were in a group like this."

JACQUI COTTRELL, TAIHAPE ACTION GROUP

Stronger connections and motivation

UMR case studies showed the moral and technical support offered by the group dynamic was encouraging. The Action Group creates chances for other conversations.

The cross-referencing between members of the Action Group provided a level of accountability and motivation that was not otherwise there.1

Facilitators who bring together like-minded farmers work hard at ensuring all farmers feel comfortable sharing and are flexible enough to know how much direction different groups require to do well building connections. It is difficult to know just from qualitative research alone, but this approach to facilitation appears to be happening in most cases but not always.

The Scarlatti evaluation of the economic benefits of RMPP Action Network² noted that RMPP have fostered:

- Enduring ability to drive change
- Diversification and economic resilience.

The RMPP Action Network encouraged rural professionals to connect more with each other and collaborate, which had the side effect of introducing more rural professionals and farmers to each other. This increased the likelihood that farmers could connect with others to form Action Groups with a common focus/purpose. It also helped strengthen the red meat sector network and its ability to face and respond to challenges like drought and COVID-19.

STRONGER CONNECTIONS

The National Group has members from across New Zealand. Their plan is to learn from business leaders outside the farm gate. Feedback from members show the benefits of increased connections within and outside the group.

"We gathered together... we are now massively stronger and self-supporting because of the group. When you are the performer in the area everyone looks to you but who gives back to these farmers, pushes and challenges them?"

HEATHER COLLINS. NATIONWIDE FARMER THINKERS ACTION GROUP FACILITATOR

Improved wellbeing and aspirations

The UMR research concluded that, given the relatively isolated nature of farming and the well-known mental health challenges that face the farming community, improved wellbeing is an important outcome of RMPP's programmes.

Action Group activities include sharing ideas with peers, learning from others, connecting with other farmers and noticing other ways of doing things. These are all pillars of the Five Ways to Wellbeing (New Zealand Mental Health Foundation).3

Aspirations of group members has been a move towards welcoming change.

> "Our group is excited about change and don't fear it, and are actually looking for it."

FRASER AVERY, NATIONWIDE FARMER THINKERS ACTION **GROUP**

^{1.} Measuring the impact of RMPP's Action Network, BakerAg, May 2020

Evaluation of the impact of the Red Meat Profit Partnership, Scarlatti Limited, June 2020

^{3.} Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand www.mentalhealth.org.nz/home/ways-to-wellbeing/ mhaw.nz/assets/Let-Nature-In-About-the-Five-Ways-to-Welbeing-FS.pdf

Level 6: Practice change

This level of evaluation looked at the impact of RMPP Action Network on practice change (i.e. how farmers operate in all aspects of their business).

There has been self-reported and observed practice change on-farm as a result of being in an Action Group.

The results from the RMPP six monthly surveys showed most farmers agreed they had made production changes and increased their farm business skills and confidence to make changes on-farm, as a result of being involved in an Action Group. These indicators increased the longer farmers were involved in a group.

UMR qualitative interviews with thirty farmer group members concluded there is solid evidence of practice change.

BakerAg case studies identified the practice changes and evaluated their production and financial benefits. They conducted in-depth surveys of fourteen farmer members (September 2019 to May 2020) located across New Zealand who had been involved for more than one year.

The Action Groups these farmers are involved in had seven key themes as their topics of interest: animal performance, business planning, financial management, feed management, pastures, environmental and managing soils.

The case studies showed that on-farm impacts were often due to several interacting factors, rather than one specific change (Figure M).

Examples of practical changes to bring around the results included:

- Switch to rotational grazing
- Improved pasture utilisation
- Using feed budgeting
- Dung beetles for diversity
- Change ram breed
- Body condition scoring ewes
- Implemented goal setting
- Fencing waterways
- Moved from spring to autumn purchased cattle
- Speciality crop for hoggets
- Pole planting for hill stabilisation
- Quarterly meetings with staff and consultant
- Implemented an animal health plan
- Better allocation of feed to meet stock needs.

Case study region	Measured and modelled changes
King Country	6% increase in cattle income 32% increase gross revenue 70% attributed to RMPP = \$32/ha/p.a.
Tararua	16% increase lamb survival 55% increase in sheep revenue 60% attributed to RMPP = \$28/ha/p.a.
Hawke's Bay	38% less land farmed for bulls but 50% increase productivity (+294kg CW/ha) 36% increase bull profitability = \$1,152/ha/p.a. 100% attributed to RMPP (\$341/ha/p.a.)
Canterbury	More lambs killed prime off ewe (from 10% to 26%) Improved gross revenue \$42,000/year 50% attributed to RMPP = \$45/ha/p.a.
Central Otago	77% increase net equity 39% increase in stock carrying capacity 30% attributed to RMPP = \$144/ha/p.a.
Southland	Extra 30 lambs/ha Better quality feed 50% attributed to RMPP = \$550/ha/p.a.

Figure M: sample of measured and modelled changes made on-farm as a result of RMPP Action Group participation, BakerAg, June 2020

The profitability increases witnessed were due to both a single management change as well as from broader strategic changes.

> "Most farmers report practice change, at least half report production increases and tentatively describe extra profit." **UMR**

MANAGEMENT CHANGE

The group focus was transition feeding of 100kg bull calves. The new idea, introduced during an Action Group meeting, was to feed bought-in calves the same meal as the farm they came from. Farmers who tried this experienced a drop in calf deaths from 3.5% to 1.9% and an increase in final weight (335kg compared to 326kg the year

Profit increase was \$35,000 (fewer deaths and 10kg head advantage over 1,000 bulls, less costs).

"It's come to the fore from the Action Group and that set's them up, they are in a better position going into the dry part of summer."

FARMER, NORTHLAND ACTION GROUP

BROADER AND ENDURING MANAGEMENT CHANGE

The group had eight farm businesses with members ranging in age from 30s to 50s. The focus was on bringing efficiencies into their businesses. They engaged a subject matter expert to help analyse the business, particularly discretionary expenditure and cost structure and discovered the potential to save thousands in fertiliser costs.

"They have a far better understanding around using farm business software and they are looking at what is really driving the profit in their business rather than what they think is driving it. When they spend a dollar now, they want to know what they are getting for their dollar."

SEAN BENNETT. HAWKE'S BAY ACTION GROUP **FACILITATOR**



King Country Action Group

Level 7: Social, economic and environmental impacts within the red meat sector

The evaluation completed by Scarlatti looked at the financial return and the wider social and environmental impacts within the red meat sector.

The goal of the RMPP investment is to lift profitability and productivity of sheep and beef farmers in New Zealand.

All Action Groups economic benefits

The overall economic impact of the RMPP Action Network on the red meat sector was calculated by Scarlatti and averaged over an eight year rollout period.

Scarlatti's evaluation was independently peer reviewed by Sense Partners Limited. UMR contributed to the economic evaluation by undertaking research of attitudes and behaviour changes resulting from participation in Action Groups.

The evaluation shows that the benefits to participating farmers in Action Groups is another \$24/ha or \$17,712 per farm of profitability, each year, building over an eight year period from joining.

The investment of \$14.4 million in the RMPP Action Network generated benefits with a present value (PV) of \$381 million or 26:1.

This is a significant and ongoing contribution towards the goal of the entire RMPP programme.

The RMPP Action Network contributed 47% towards the overall RMPP programme economic impact.

Across New Zealand sheep and beef farms economic benefits to 2025

When averaged across the sector, including farms that gain a 'spill over' benefit and farmers that do not benefit, the impact is to raise profitability by \$5.51/ha.

This is \$46 million across the entire sector by 2025 (Figure N).

"In the first summer our farm business had average lamb carcass weight grow from 17-17.4kg to 18kg. This was due to taking part in an Action Group. Now we're hoping to reduce lamb losses the coming season, as a result of work undertaken through the group." FARMER, SOUTHLAND ACTION GROUP

Action Groups economic benefits

The BakerAg case studies on fourteen farmer members (September 2019 to May 2020) located across New Zealand, showed that the economic impact of RMPP Action Network to these farmers has been considerable and positive.

Specific KPIs were benchmarked, based on 2018/19 financials and compared to the BakerAg class average and top 25%.

Results showed individual farmers attributed 55% of their EBITRm net gain to participation in their Action Group. The values ranged from 20% to 100% and is considered conservative because the survey took place within the first 12 to 18 months of a three-year programme with further incremental returns in subsequent years.

The average net gain in EBITRm across the fourteen case studies was \$116/ha/p.a. (ranged from \$7.50/ha to \$550/ha). This is 55% of the total net gain.

The top result from a case study farm was an extra \$220,000 EBITRm from better quality lamb feed.

PARTICIPATION IN AN ACTION GROUP

OVERALL INDUSTRY IMPACT IS **ESTIMATED AT** \$46 MILLION **PER ANNUM BY** 2025

PARTICIPATING FARMS INCREASED **PROFITABILITY BY \$24 PER HA/ \$17,712 PER FARM EACH YEAR**

Estimating benefits twenty years out

The two figures below show modelling to track the impact of the RMPP Action Network to 2040. The impact tails off around 2032. It all depends on the number of farmers joining Action Groups.

There is significant opportunity to increase overall industry impact if a greater number of farms participating in Action Groups can be achieved (best case scenario). Figure O

shows that there is \$2/ha/p.a. difference over the red meat sector if adoption is the best case compared to the central case.

It was calculated that the per hectare advantage figure grows to \$6.96/ha or \$58 million across the entire sector, when looking out towards 2032.

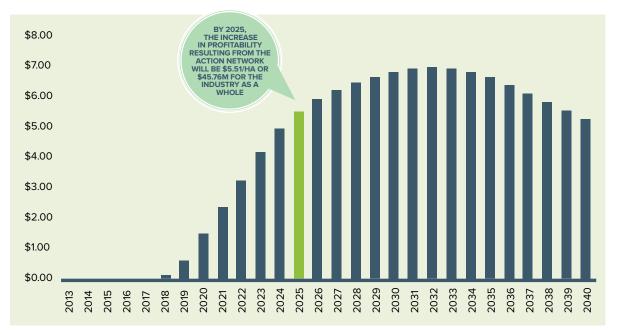


Figure N: overall industry impact due to the RMPP Action Network in the central-case or most likely to occur (\$/ha), Scarlatti Limited, June 2020

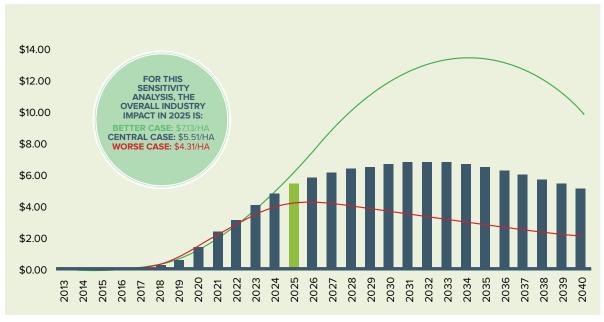


Figure O: overall impact due to Action Network - three options depending on the level of adoption (\$/ha), Scarlatti Limited, June 2020

Involving the wider community for environmental benefits

Action Group influence has grown beyond red meat farmers. In 2019, provision was made to the eligibility criteria to allow non-red meat businesses participate in Action Groups. Three environmental groups were formed at this point. These businesses did not receive the Action Group funding.

The benefit of their participation is expected to be strengthened partnerships between farmers, tourism operators, and environmental and cultural groups. There are currently approximately twenty groups with a primary focus on water catchments.

Social licence

The main non-economic benefits arising from Action Groups, as identified in the Scarlatti report,4 are improved wellbeing, environmental outcomes, animal welfare, social licence and succession planning.

Evidence shows farmers have changed their farming methods to improve environmental outcomes and animal welfare. Together they combine to improve the perception of farming by those outside of farming. This, in turn, cements farming's social licence. Social licence is the ability of a farming business to carry on farming because of the confidence society has that it will behave in a socially and environmentally acceptable way.

Publicity

RMPP interviewed farmers and published articles in various publications and on social media. Since inception over thirty articles have been published. These articles help encourage adoption of beneficial farm activities in the wider red meat sector.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

Within the Upper Clutha Basin, six Action Groups were formed in 2019 and they joined with an existing Lake Wanaka Action Group. Sixty farm businesses are involved.

Connector, Dr Amanda Bell saw an opportunity for farmers to form Action Groups within the catchment, to build on the work done by Water Action Initiative (WAI) Wanaka, which developed a community catchment

Each Action Group has three shared goals:

- To create a whole-of-catchment environmental plan with goals nuanced to their particular area
- To have individual environmental plans
- To engage in communication with rural communities, tourism bodies and urban neighbours.

Groups are creating a statement of intent, that goes beyond any expectations set out by government; nationally or regionally. This is front footing changes in anticipation of legislative moves to farm emission monitoring in 2025.

Innovations include native fish repatriation, working with a ski field and distillery to look at water monitoring and the impact of tourism. Three groups are putting in place carbon mitigation plans and developing a workshop around what farmers need to know and possible solutions.



Bill and Gareth McCall, Gore Progressive Farmers Action Group

^{4.} Evaluation of the Impact of the Red Meat Profit Partnership, Scarlatti Limited, June 2020

4. X-FACTORS

This section outlines the aspects of RMPP Action Network that have contributed the most to the success of Action Groups. This is not an exhaustive list, rather the most influential factors according to RMPP.

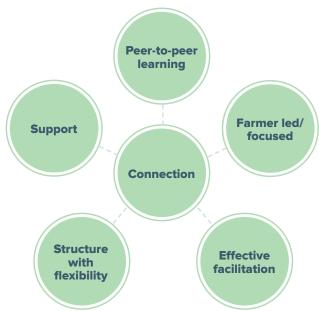


Figure P: RMPP have identified six key factors that have contributed to the scale of positive practice change, as evidenced in the evaluations.

4.1 What makes RMPP Action Network Successful?

Connection

This is the heart of what makes RMPP Action Network successful. Well-formed and functioning groups have proven to develop a strong foundation of support and connection.

The important connections are:

- Farmers linked with like-minded farmers
- Rural professionals linked with other rural professionals
- Rural professionals linked with farmers
- Action Groups interlinked
- Sector good organisations (i.e. RMPP type organisations, B+LNZ) linked across the sector.

Sharpening the connection process

In the early stages the process of connecting farmers into Action Groups was a challenge. In particular, the time lag to progress from connecting around an idea, to actually forming the group.

At the other extreme, rushing group membership could lead to an engagement and retention issue. Often these challenges were accentuated where connectors only relied on their narrow farmer networks.

To strengthen the connecting process RMPP Action Network focused on:

- Broadening connections by working with a wider range of farmers, rural professionals and sector good organisations
- Encouraging peer connections, for example, farmer to farmer, rural professional to other rural professional
- Developing the extension pathway (Figure E on page 9) to allow a staged approach to getting small groups underway. This included a large group session to highlight an issue, a workshop, then an invitation to form a small group.
- Using facilitators to help explore and identify broader or more specific focus areas
- Flexibility allowing Action Group members to start in one place but end up elsewhere. Connections operate in a similar way.

Through the customer support function, RMPP played a strong role in providing connection oversight.

Peer-to-peer learning

The limit of seven to nine farm businesses in an Action Group is core to the success of them.

Small groups are intimate enough to encourage participation and develop an understanding of peers in the group. This breeds an environment of trust and support, that ultimately leads to strong accountability. The culture shifts away from attending one-off events, to building confidence to share ideas, knowledge and experience leading to learning and change over time.

Peer-to-peer learning is about using the 'power of the knowledge in the room' as a primary focus. Subject matter experts do play a part in filling knowledge gaps through 'topping up rather than tipping in' and by supporting individual members.

Change on-farm is more likely to occur with appropriate support. The small group approach enables this support.

Farmer-led and focused

Action Groups are farmer-led so have the interests of the farming businesses at the centre of the activity.

Farmers determine the structure and rules of their group and how they spend their funds. This provides a shared vision and a platform for accountability.

Having members buy in to a common purpose is critical to ongoing engagement and enduring success.

Reluctant paperwork at times

At some points there was tension between meeting RMPP administrative requirements and keeping the farmer-led nature of an Action Group.

An example was the requirement to develop an Action Plan including calculation of three KPIs and lodge these with RMPP in order to keep the group funding.

Some farmers did not see this as a priority and needed encouragement to recognise that measuring, monitoring and benchmarking, supported with action planning, is good practice to identify and drive improvement in farm businesses.

However, what is most important in implementing these practices is ensuring this is paced to suit where farmers confidence and trust levels are at.

Facilitators support the process by keeping the focus on the farm business participants, ensuring all needs are understood, being met and ensuring everyone gets involved and contributes. Engaging a facilitator ensures that this tension can be managed well.

Some Action Groups have started by sharing financial information. Some have progressed to this and some to sharing Farm Action Plans amongst the group. Farmers report back on how they are going and get feedback, this is motivating.

Effective facilitation

"The facilitator is the conductor."

Effective facilitation has been critical to the success of Action Groups. Facilitators bring structure to groups that help to ensure farmers' needs are being addressed at Action Group activities.

Where good effective facilitation is in place, groups report ongoing engagement, strong accountability and successful group and individual outcomes.

Where Action Groups have signalled struggles, i.e. poor engagement and communication, this is often attributed to missing key facilitation elements and support.

Effective facilitators will connect to a range of quality independent experts and resources that would otherwise be out of reach for most farmers. The RMPP Action Network Rural Professional and Action Group Directories have provided a connection platform to support this process.

Not all facilitators have achieved the right balance between being farmer-led while needing to lead farmers. Reflecting on the time and resource put into facilitators, the RMPP Action Network team acknowledge that this needed more focus and support.

Facilitators need to have the skills to make the call on a group-by-group basis around how much structure and leadership each Action Group needs.

On-going training and support of facilitators will be critical to the success of Action Groups.

Indeed, it is critical to the successful growth and application of small group learning in general, within the sheep and beef sector, or further across primary industries.

> "Facilitation training has given me the techniques and methods to build strong relationships and to extract answers from the room, not from me."

> > **BYRON TAYLOR,** TAIHAPE ACTION GROUP **FACILITATOR**

Structure with flexibility

Action Groups have some base structure including the requirement to develop Extension and Action Plans. This gives a sense of direction and the right structure to drive change.

The RMPP Action Network approach allows for both short and long-term focuses, and the ability to adjust and narrow or broaden the focus to suit the common needs of the Action Group. Some groups formed around a narrow focus, for example, harnessing value from electronic tags, whilst others focused more broadly, for example, business planning.

Diversity in group make up, such as varying farming systems, geography, participant age, experience and farmer familiarity, can play a role in establishing a dynamic foundation for effective learning and support.

The size requirements (seven to nine farm businesses) also requires flexibility. If vacancies come up in an Action Group, group members should be encouraged to tap into connector networks to attract appropriate new members to take their place. Care must be given to ensuring the right fit for new and previous group members as a thriving group dynamic is a critical success factor.

Support

Support is provided at two levels:

- Programme level
- Action Group level.

At a programme level, the dollar allocation per farm business provided a financial 'carrot' to farmers and also promoted the initial commitment of farmers to the Action Group process. RMPP provided support through the customer support function. This ensured accountability to the principles of the small group approach and the appropriate use of funding. This is a significant and recognised success factor.

At an Action Group level, repeat connection builds the confidence in individuals to take knowledge and turn it into action on-farm, in a way that is relevant for them. This increases confidence to bring new knowledge and learning back into the Action Group, fostering continuous improvement and growth.

In combination, these factors lead to a supportive and trusted environment that drives accountability and commitment to change.



RP Braided, Rural Professional Action Group, Canterbury

5. LETTING IT FLY

This section outlines options for the continued application of the small group model (Action Groups) into the future.

The legacy of the RMPP Action Network for the extension area is that it has demonstrated that small group learning works really effectively if the right support pillars are in place.

It can be a hugely successful vehicle to add value economically, socially and to the environment which the business works in.

It has application beyond the red meat sector. It does not need to be branded RMPP Action Network but rather, it is the underlying elements and approach itself that has merit.

Central to the successful continued application of the approach, in this shape and form, is a commitment of leadership in the red meat sector to continuing it and recognising it has value.

Small group learning model shows proven benefits

The RMPP Extension Design project was developed because of the perceived low uptake of new knowledge and research in the red meat sector. The rate of adoption and change was considered to be low and this was a barrier to improving profitability and sustainability.

From this evolved an Extension Model which was part of developing a coordinated national extension and uptake framework. At the heart of it was the farm team (see Figure D on page 7) with fully wrapped support.

This small group-based approach to extension, has proved to be an effective way of achieving action on-farm as illustrated by the economic impact evaluation results. This evaluation also highlighted the economic potential up to 2040, demonstrating an economic argument to continue to support the extension approach.



King Country Action Group

Helping the approach endure beyond RMPP is critical for the health of the extension pathway (see Figure F on page 9).

The red meat sector is well known for excellent extension offerings in the mass media, large group and workshop space. RMPP Action Network though small group learning and support, has plugged the gap between large scale events and one-on-one support to build confidence to take action on-farm.

The enduring return on investment from RMPP Action Network depends on:

- Action Groups continuing beyond the life of the RMPP programme
- The number of new Action Groups formed each

Transfer of management

In October 2019 (concluding in March 2021) the management of the RMPP Action Network programme (including Action Groups) shifted to B+LNZ.

From the beginning of RMPP Action Network, B+LNZ were recognised as an appropriate home for it. Because of this, RMPP Action Network Management Systems were embedded in B+LNZ through shared systems.

The transition period has enabled B+LNZ to review their extension work and focus, in preparation for integrating the approach into their business to compliment the way they support extension in the sector.

The key findings about small group learning, identified in the formal evaluations, have supported B+LNZ in this process.

5.1 Key Considerations for the Endurance of **Existing Action Groups**

This list is not exhaustive but created to inform of the potential challenges and opportunities moving from a 100% funded model.

Supporting farmers when deciding on group shape for the future

Action Groups have access to RMPP funding until the conclusion of the programme in March 2021. Some Action Groups are already negotiating the end of the seed funding and are transitioning to being fully self-funded or, in-part, depending on whether they can source other funds. For other groups, this will be a discussion that is yet to be resolved.

It is of benefit to provide administrative templates to groups to help move into self-funding next phase i.e. what they need to do, how to run a bank account.

Being true to the principles and x-factors is what will give greater change of ongoing success and growth. Providing overarching small group connection and support (for example, phone/email/resourcing support) ensures:

- Groups and facilitators employ good practice extension plans, action plans, use benchmarking as appropriate to the needs of the group
- Connection with other groups, along with connection to other rural professionals, experts and facilitator transition, is supported
- Facilitators are encouraged to engage in support activity to help them be better
- Connection with sector related programme/ workshops and resources
- Everyone is kept abreast of changes looming.

Completion of KPIs during the RMPP managed phase was

Measuring Net Production per Effective Hectare has proven particularly challenging for some farm businesses. When forming Action Groups, consideration should be given to what KPIs are relevant and appropriate for the members of the group.

It is acknowledged that measuring and monitoring, supported with benchmarking, is good practice to support identifying and driving improvement opportunities for farm businesses.

However, what is most important is encouraging and supporting farmers along the understanding and learning journey, to develop the confidence to implement this good practice, and support them understand and grow their

To ensure connections are maintained, the Rural Professional directory and Action Group directory could be enhanced to better support the sector to engage.

One of the areas lacking was cross-pollination between Action Groups, for example, combined activities or general sharing of experiences.

Supporting the role of facilitator

RMPP opened up a whole new pool of facilitators and uplifted the skills of existing facilitators.

Some have argued that there should be funding to support facilitators continue with RMPP Action Groups. However, it is arguably more important to support the role of the facilitator through provision of appropriate on-going professional development opportunities.

On reflection, RMPP identified that resourcing facilitation support was challenging. To provide a good level of support (including observation and review) it requires dedicated resourcing and focus. This could be considered when developing future support for facilitators.

The facilitator review process has been successful and well received when done, but has been time consuming and needs more focus and resourcing.

Attracting facilitators to the Action Hubs proved difficult to at times due to travel distances and being time short. The online webinars proved to be more popular due to reduced travel time and shorter total time commitment. These could be continued, in combination with physical Action Hub events.

Continual revisiting the way of doing things

Consideration could be given to other industries, such as sport, medical, and education, who focus on supporting capability development and support frameworks for key roles in their sectors. These could be applied within the agri-sector. A structured and monitored capability and support system, focused on broad extension practice, small group facilitation, would help drive alignment and consistent extension delivery and support for farmers.

5.2 Use the Principles of Action Network as a Base to Carry Forward

RMPP Action Network has been a shot in the arm for extension within the red meat sector.

The guiding principles are important and need to be readily available, shared and promoted to rural professionals in the discussion group field.

Leadership will ensure the Action Group principles are kept alive as a legacy.

Key principles

In summary, these key principles were carried through from the research and pilot programme underpinning RMPP Action Network:

- · Involve the farm team to allow for continued discussion, learning and support beyond group activities.
- Group size of seven to nine farm businesses allows effective learning. As farm team/partner involvement is encouraged, the total number of people involved shouldn't exceed 18-20 people.
- Effective and enduring Action Groups are farmer-focused and allow for flexibility to adjust and adapt to situations over time i.e. form around a common focus.
- Provide a medium for farmers to learn from and share with other farmers, by providing well-trained skilled facilitators. They encourage an inclusive environment allowing collective responsibility to support farmers take action on-farm.
- · Provide access to subject matter experts as it suits the needs of the group.

6. APPENDIX

If you are viewing this publication electronically click on the resource title to read it online. If you are viewing a print copy of this publication all resources listed below are available on the RMPP website – www.rmpp.co.nz or the RMPP Action Network website - www.actionnetwork.co.nz

Support resources created for RMPP Action Network

RMPP Action Network Handbook - Guide to help connect, form and facilitate an Action Group

Action Group Directory

Rural Professional Directory

Facilitator Toolkit

Connector Toolkits

Lead Facilitator Workshop

Action Network Fundamentals and Extension Design Workshop

Learning Modules: (Taking Ownership of Your Financials workshop, Key Performance Indicator Workbook and Workshop, Small Group Learning Module Workshop)

Facilitator Role Description

Code of Ethics

A Core Set of KPI Measures for Red Meat Farming **Businesses**

RMPP Māori Farming Qualitative Report, UMR Research, 2014

Video resources (Why Get Involved, Value of RMPP Extension Design Project – interviews with farmers, **Explaining Extension Model)**

Trial Farmer Booklet

Resources evaluating RMPP Action Network

RMPP Action Network Evaluation - Stories from the Regions, UMR Research, July 2020

Measuring the Impact of RMPP's Action Network, BakerAg, May 2020

Evaluation of the Impact of the Red Meat Profit Partnership, Scarlatti Limited, June 2020 (not available online)

RMPP Farmer Surveys Evaluation Data (six monthly) (not available online)

Measuring the Impact of Human Capability on Farm Profits, Scarlatti Limited, June 2020 (not available online)

RMPP Pilot Evaluation, AL6 Southland, UMR Research, April 2020

RMPP Action Network Evaluation Plan, Version 3

Resources on the design of RMPP Action Network

RMPP Extension Design Project Final Report, Denise Bewsell, Tony Brenton-Rule, Red Meat Profit Partnership, October 2019

Informing Extension Pilot Project Design Final Report, James Turner, Tracy Payne and Kelly Rijswijk, AgResearch, October 2014

RMPP Resources and Tools Final Report, June 2020

Sheep and Beef Farmer Segmentation, Final Report, UMR Research, December 2015





















