Coping with unchosen change – an extension practitioner's perspective

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Abstract. Using a case study approach on ten years of drought in Northern Victoria, the learnings of extension practitioners are explored to discuss how extension programs dealing with unchosen change may differ from those delivered around voluntary change. This study shows that whilst the need for good planning, delivery and reflection are heightened, many of our existing extension tools are still relevant. The paper identifies which of these were useful and suggests modifications that others may find useful. These include: tools such as understanding one's own strengths and weaknesses under stress, tips for maintaining and developing networks and collaborations, understanding farmer's behaviours, and timing of communication. The paper also uses the opportunity of reflection to discuss the change in world views around risk, priorities and networks and the impacts on the next extension program.

Keywords: drought, self, team, collaborators, clients, programs

Introduction

For the purposes of this paper, we define unchosen change to be the change that chooses you, rather than chosen change that would be described as the change that you chose. The unchosen change we use as our case study is the ten years of drought conditions experienced in the irrigation region of Northern Victoria (Australia) between 1996 and 2006. Although Northern Victoria is predominately a dairy farming region, other farming enterprises in the region include horticulture, cropping, beef and sheep.

As an indication of the severity of drought, the region had experienced below average rainfalls since 1996, and by 2002, 80% of Victoria was drought affected. The irrigated dairy farmers were particularly hard hit as they were reliant on irrigated perennial pastures and purchased grain and fodder to fill in feed gaps. Irrigation storages also received the lowest inflows on record, there were vastly inflated input prices and reduced milk prices, dairy farms faced the most challenging farming conditions in living memory (Leeman and Shaw 2004).

The Victoria State Government provided a support program to these dairy farmers in the form of financial support and specific drought response activities led by the dairy extension team (of up to ten staff) who were employed by the Department of Primary Industries.

In this paper, we will discuss how the dairy extension team dealt with this unchosen change. The objective is to document their learnings with the intention of passing on some tactical experience that may be applied to other situations in the future.

Method

A historical case study approach is used, relying on a number of sources of data to try and validate the observations made in the discussion. The data includes previously unpublished minutes, internal reports, most significant change stories and the authors' recollections. The weakness of this approach is that it is a largely unrepeatable case study; the alternative was that this tacit knowledge and experience would continue to go unrecorded.

The results of the case study are a series of observations that are discussed in the next sections under sub-headings of planning, delivery and the end.

Planning for unchosen change

In this section we discuss some of the planning considerations associated with delivering an extension program during unchosen change.

Know thy self and thy team

Whilst we can make generalisations about extension officers based on their skills and personalities, it is important to understand the individual and team capability no matter what extension program you are delivering. Standard capability and personality tools are useful, but in the case of developing and delivering a drought program, consideration of what are the extra and/or different capability requirements is vital. For the extension team, it meant a greater emphasis on one-to-one consulting delivery, and from a technical perspective, more dairy cow

nutrition and financial budgeting. Intensive internal training was given to staff in both a consulting approach and the technical aspects important on farm at the time.

The other challenge when working in the unchosen change space is the impact of stress on yourself and the rest of the team. This stress is likely to result from both the intensity and speed of change as well as an increased workload. As a team, we found using the Myers Briggs personality types whilst under stress a useful tool. This enabled the team to have a framework for discussion about our own behaviour under stress and to offer support to one another as well as to our clients. It also enabled us to understand the spread of reactions we were seeing in our clients and be more tolerant.

When does the change begin?

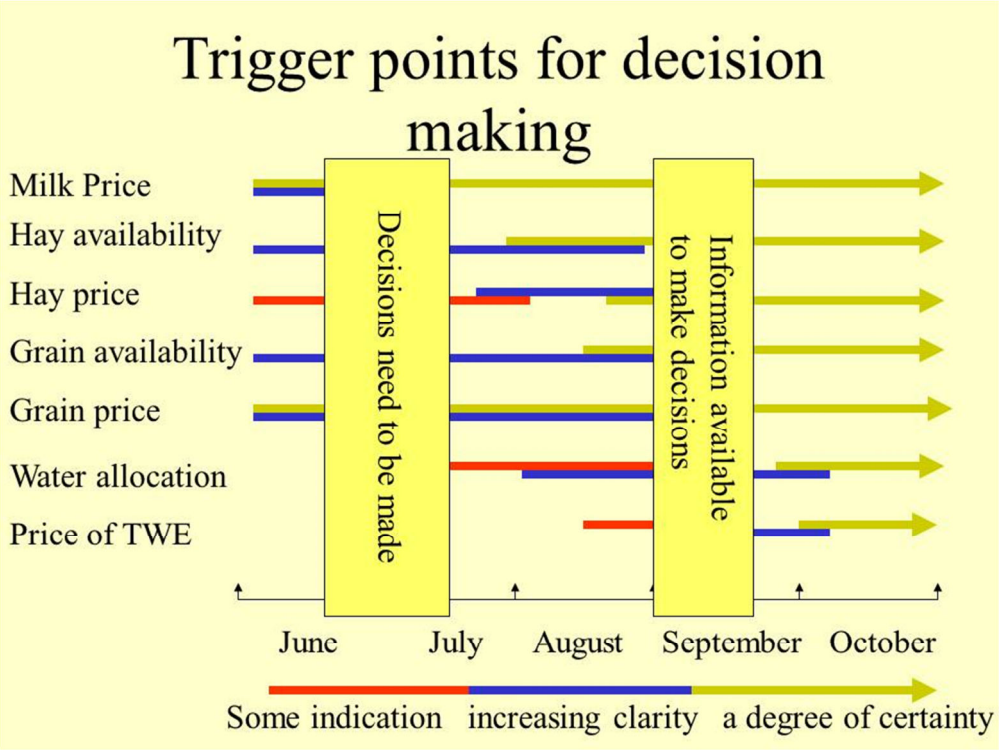
Dealing with unchosen change may also mean dealing with the frustration of an unclear start. In the case of the northern Victorian situation, we had two 'false' starts to the drought. As an extension team we planned, but did not deliver, a number of dry seasonal conditions responses before conditions were considered to have deteriorated enough to act with a special program.

We used the collective knowledge of a 'normal' year that we documented as a list of Trigger Points to help us decide if we were in an unchosen change or not. Whether it is caused by nature, or man, having baseline data helps build the case required to convince stakeholders that action needs to be taken.

As can be seen in Figure 1, we made up of a list of important farm business factors that we needed to consider at various times of the year. Late June was a critical time for dairy farmers to make decisions about stocking rate and purchasing feed. It was also the time planning would occur for extension programs. Discussions would occur about the probability of multiple factors occurring in both early winter and again in early spring. The failure of both winter and spring year after year also had a compounding impact on availability of hay, grain and irrigation water.

The tool as presented in Figure 1 was used to talk through the options with stakeholders. We used it in a checklist format for farmers to help facilitate the discussion around options for inputs. This tool was effective as it used collective knowledge from stakeholders that created ownership and could be used for multiple audiences.

Figure 1.Trigger points for decision making 2003/04 season



TWE- Transferable Water Entitlement
Source: Shaw and Shannon 2003

Know thy clients

Networks are important in any practice change but even more so when the change is unchosen. By definition, the farmers we were dealing with were not seeking the change; in fact many were going through the grieving process as a result of the changes that were forced upon them. Working with people they trust was of more importance than ever, so making sure we were able to use the extension staff with large farmer networks was important. For us this involved getting our more experienced staff out of their project management roles and back to the 'coal face', using their networks. This was extremely successful with these staff personally seeing many farmers through very difficult and life changing decisions. Evidence of the success of a trusted network was the referral to these extension staff by neighbours, friends or other trusted service providers.

Farmer leaders are also an important part of your network, whether they lead a discussion group or have an agri-political role. In unchosen change you must be more aware that these leaders are also trying to run a farm. We found that many were feeling the extra burden of supporting their neighbours and required extra support.

We found it was important to plan to use these contacts and networks as part of our delivery, but to remember they will require extra support.

Know thy collaborators

A model that worked well for us was to initiate an Industry Guidance Group (IGG) involving a representative of all the service providers in the region. This group's role was to exchange information and keep everyone 'on the same page'. Each organisation would contribute their observations of what was needed, and what they could contribute to an effective response.

This group was very pragmatic about meetings. Over the tough years it started up and then went into recess a number of times depending on need. In later years this function was fulfilled by a Regional Extension Committee, which was a smaller permanent group of industry representatives whose function was to help coordinate delivery and respond to need.

The IGG was also supported by a technical working group. This was a much smaller, more responsive group, which agreed on the appropriate technical content and brought together the resources from a number of organisations. This group was very successful at developing a clear and consistent message that would be used in our delivery. Dairy extension staff played a critical role in supporting this group but the collective expertise of this industry team was essential as no one organisation could have done this alone.

We conclude that the secret to these collaborative groups was that they had a shared objective and were resourced to act.

Factors influencing delivery

The delivery was predominately a three pronged approach, with the IGG deciding the 'need', the IGG technical group working out the 'what' and 'how', and the dairy extension team playing a pivotal connecting role in the delivery to service providers, farmer groups and individual farmers as set out in Figure 2.

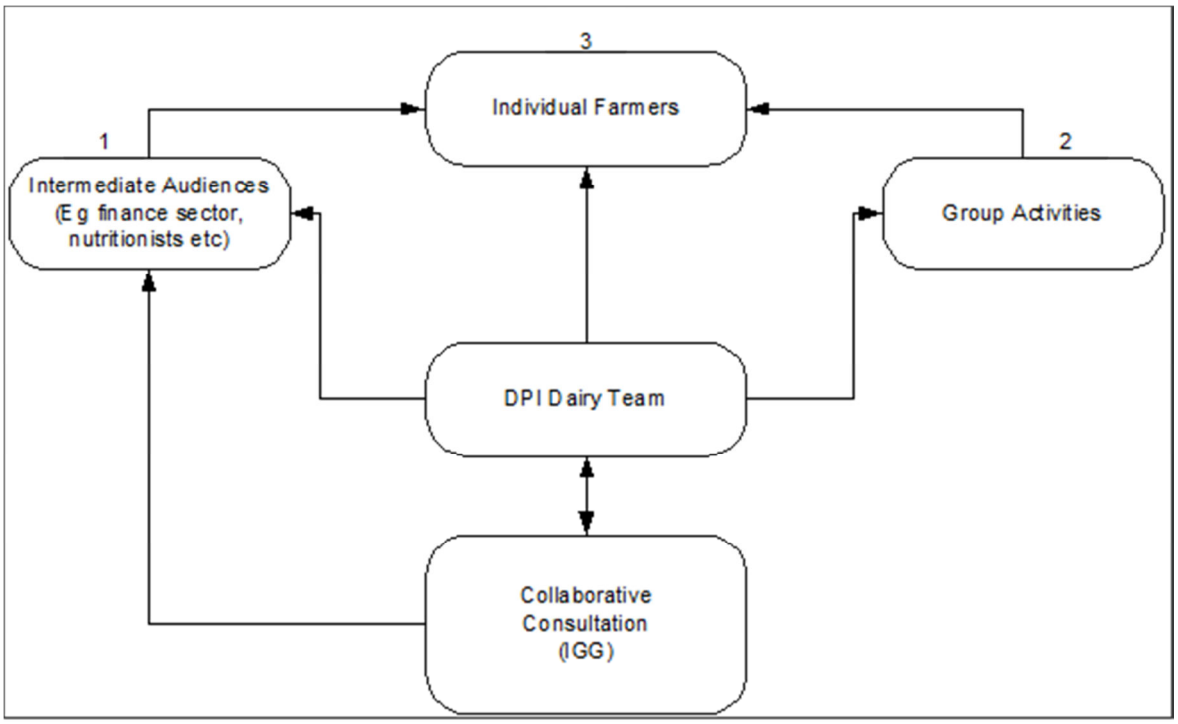
In the following section we look at delivery from different perspectives and we observe some differences when dealing with unchosen change.

The 'haves' and 'have nots'

When change is unchosen there is the potential for the perception of 'haves' and 'have nots' to arise within the community. This occurred on a number of occasions based on differences in irrigation allocation in different systems, differences in eligibility for exceptional circumstances (EC) support, geographic location, and past income and wealth. This situation led to confusion and disappointment by the 'have nots' and it also led to farmers in the 'have' category feeling guilty. These feelings acted as barriers to the extension effort. Whilst we could not do anything about the policies that caused the different groups, we found that we could at least minimise the feelings of difference.

From an extension perspective, we did this by ensuring advice was consistent. This meant ensuring we understood the policies and rules that had created the 'have' and 'have not' situation. Thus, we ensured that we provided consistent information to the service providers we worked with as well as direct to the farmers.

Figure 2.Theory of action of the collaboration



We found we had to think about the extension methods we would use more carefully in the 'have' and 'have not' environment. The use of mass media could lead to confusion as farmers might hear something on the radio only to find it did not apply to them. We found it worked best if the information was provided direct to the community in forums where individuals could ask questions and seek clarification on their unique situation. However, meetings at local halls also carried a high degree of risk for the extension program as they created potential for individuals or small groups to incite anger within the meetings. There was also a high risk that individuals had become so disheartened that they would not attend.

Running small events is ideal where individuals can ask questions in a safe environment, but is resource hungry, which is why it was critical to have as many service providers on board as possible to support the delivery

Farmers and 'welfare'

We observed farmers were reluctant to access EC payments due to the stigma associated with receiving welfare from the Government. This was identified by tracking the number of applications versus estimations of the number that would be eligible. Mass media was used to encourage farmers not to self-assess and to put in an application. All service providers reinforced this message.

We found extension practitioners need to be aware of farmers' attitudes to different policy instruments such as grants or income subsidies. Trusted professionals were very useful in helping us get over this hurdle.

Farmers and information

We found it was essential to develop easy to understand and consistent messages particularly when your clients are under stress. For example probabilities are a hard thing to understand at the best of times. Working with the water service sector, we were able to turn a table of numbers in Table 1 into a simple graph in Figure 3.

Table1. Example table of water allocation probabilities

Forecast Allocations

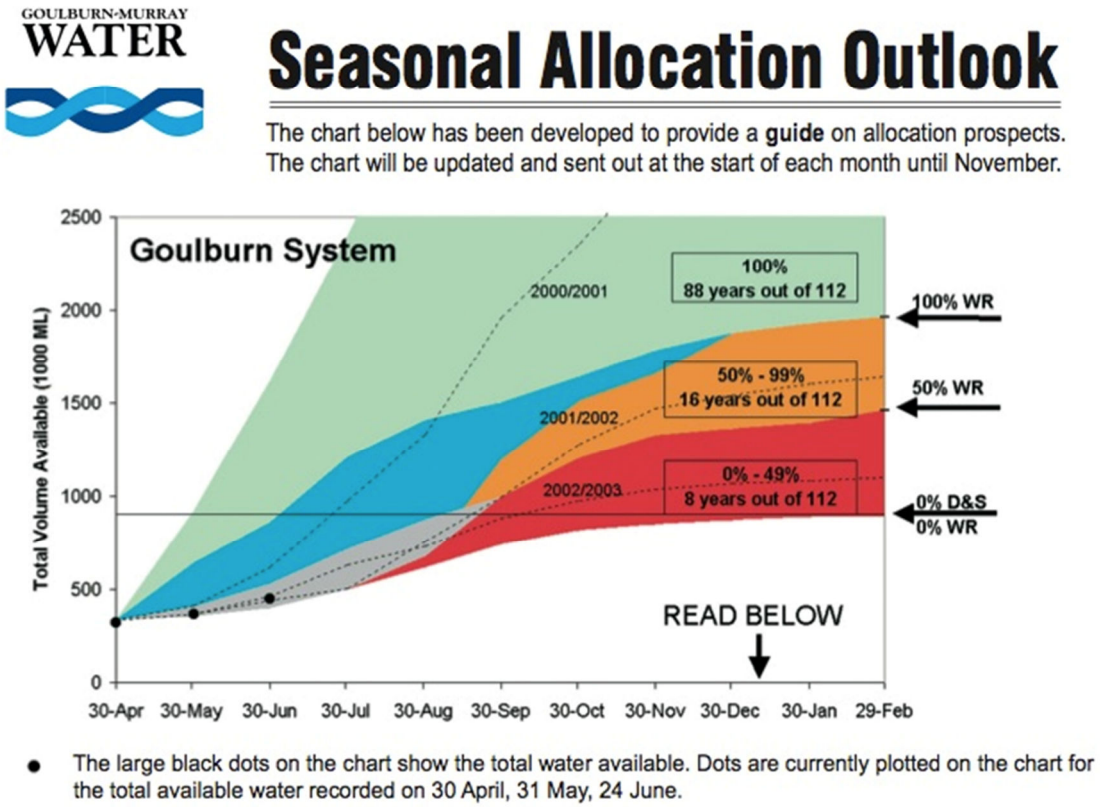
	15 August	15 October	15 December	15 February
9 chances in 10	0 % WR	18 % WR	35 % WR	50 % WR
7 chances in 10	0 % WR	51 % WR	80 % WR	99 % WR
5 chances in 10	6 % WR	83 % WR	100 % WR	100 % WR
3 chances in 10	20 % WR	100 % WR	100 % WR	100 % WR

How to read this table

The above table gives the chances in 10 for the allocation announced in August, October, December or February reaching the levels shown. For example, there are 7 chances in 10 that the Goulburn System allocation will be 51% of water Right (WR) or better by 15 October. This is the same as saying that there are 3 chances in 10 that the 15 October allocation will be less than 51% Water Right.

This information was represented as a graph and explained consistently everywhere, at field days, seminars, on farm visits and published in the local papers every week. It was very important that this information was shown consistently so that farmers could see how things were improving (or not). Seasonal outlook and water allocation was a critical element in the 'trigger point' framework.

Figure 3. Example of water allocation probability graph



- The large black dots on the chart show the total water available. Dots are currently plotted on the chart for the total available water recorded on 30 April, 31 May, 24 June.

Confidence of clients

The level of confidence in farmers to make farm management decisions dropped considerably during the drought period as is shown in the following story from one of the dairy extension officers (names have been changed).

> Peter's first visit was in Spring 2002. It lasted four hours and primarily involved moving the farmer through his anger and tears and began to build a relationship. During this visit the farmer showed Peter the chair he had been sitting in after milking. Having lost all confidence in his ability, rather than make any decision he just sat in his chair because he didn't want to make a decision in case it was the wrong decision *(Hawker 2003)*.

This is an extreme but true story that illustrates that an intensive and on-going approach is required involving one to one advice.

Down time

Most farmers could not afford the time, or the money, for a holiday. Purely social events were offered in communities with support services like ours in attendance. Farmers were able to take a business card and follow-up later in a very non-threatening way. Women pampering days, activities for children or a day at the footy are all important. Discussion group networks can also offer support. At one of these meetings one farmer shared his story of telling his son he could not afford a pie at the footy, 'I then realised that I had just written a cheque for A$100,000 for hay, and I needed to get things in perspective. What difference would a few dollars for a pie make!'. Being able to share this story in the trusted environment of a discussion group enabled others to legitimise some time off the farm as well.

Social events are a legitimate extension activity in times of stress and help keep things in perspective when the financial belt has been tightened.

Financial grants - the spinoffs

In addition to providing much needed cash flow the use of grants and subsidises, if implemented with planning conditions, provided other benefits. These benefits included: thinking time, budget preparation (as it was a condition of the grant), a service provider to the table, and acknowledgement that others in the community understood the farmer's plight (Moule 2004). Moule (who was one of the extension officers) reported multiple cases where the financial grant application process meant that service providers were invited onto farms that they would not have seen otherwise.

Service providers were able to use the opportunity of working through the grant application process with the farm family to help with everything from feed budget to sign posting to other support services.

The importance of your collaborators

The service sector is essential to delivering a coordinated and efficient response in times of unchosen change. The cornerstone of good communication, they need to be well informed and supported.

Stress

Like us, many service providers were under considerable emotional stress, and at the same time their businesses were suffering financially as a result of the drought conditions. As part of the drought response we were able to secure funding and support to offer service providers with occasional counsellor training (Cherry 2006) that dealt with the issues of when and how to refer clients to seek mental health support. We could also provide regular get togethers that enabled all the service providers to debrief and catch up in a relaxed way.

Rumours

A critical reason for getting the service providers together is to share information and in times of rapid unchosen change, to control misinformation. There was a lot of 'pub talk' or 'tanker driver gossip' to deal with. Stories like: 'Did you hear the Jones walked their herd of 200 cows to the local abattoirs and were turned away because they did not have room for any more cows'. Engaging with service providers regularly meant the story could be corrected to the truth, which was, that the local abattoirs had a policy of not letting any farm destroy their whole herd and was assisting them to get more help whilst offering to take a small number of the worst cows.

Rumours were minimised by maintaining a consistent message by well-informed service providers.

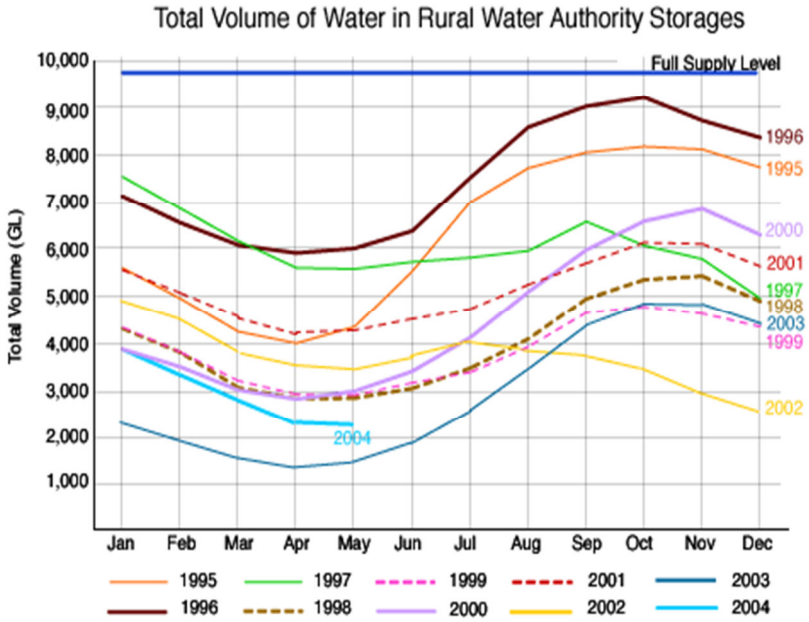
Know thy investors

Investors were some of our most important stakeholders, without their support it would have been difficult to offer a service. We had to move quickly to inform them of the signs of unchosen change. To gain their support we used both quantitative and qualitative data. In 2003, we collated a number of Most Significant Change stories as part of our evaluation. These added weight to our arguments for both the diversion of resources from our normal projects, plus extra resources.

When the change ends - How will you know?

In the same way you knew when the change was upon you, you will have data to show the end. Information such as water stored in storages in Figure 4 provides good indicators when the change is physically over. However, things do not immediately get better once the rain comes, so when is the change at its end? For drought there is a time when you realise you are going from drought survival to drought recovery. Even when using the word recovery we must be careful as it may not involve a return to the previous situation but rather recovery to a new future. The recovery will involve financial recovery and well-being recovery. But there will be a turning point and you will know it when it happens.

Figure 5. Example of water storage data, June 2004.



Recovery periods for farms

Government financial assistance was shown to reduce financial recovery periods by one to two years from five years to three or four by our farm management economics team. That is long time in a business sense. Some businesses don't recover but move on to other things and other places. The number of farms that are sold actually grows once the change is over and they can actually sell.

Well-being recovery also has to find a new norm. Farmers' attitude to risk changes when they have farmed through a one in 100 year drought. Observations made when irrigation water was available and milk prices were good showed that farmers were not prepared to push the system as they once would have done. This change in attitude to risk was a result of increased debt, tiredness, and a lack of confidence in themselves and the region.

We believe, it is important to review your estimates of adoption for any future practice change program to allow for these changed attitudes to risk.

Recovery periods for extension staff

It is fair to say that you will never be the same again, you will be very tired. It has been observed that the need for career change accelerated after the drought. During the drought many of the team were too busy and would have felt like they were letting everyone down to change careers then. Just as farmers react differently so do extension officers, many get stronger and use the wealth of knowledge gained about what drives farm businesses to offer better services, or different businesses. Some move away and do other things. When discussing this paper with one colleague they commented 'I would rather not remember, I have to keep a little of myself back now, I can't work like that again'.

This change in capability and resilience of extension staff must also be considered in future planning. Whilst some capability was gained through the period, a significant amount was lost through accelerated career change.

Keeping the collaboration going

It is unreasonable to assume that the same degree of collaboration will remain after the change. One of the keys to the success, a shared objective, can no longer be assumed. The other organisations have businesses to run, we have projects to deliver.

Reviewing collaborations, their goals, and their committees and structures that support them is also important.

Conclusion

It is difficult to gauge change as it is taking place – but looking back we can now clearly see significant change across the region – and although it was a process of 'unchosen change' many business have changed for the better. There is farming systems and management change described by improved water use efficiency, better use of available feed sources, and improved understanding of risk management. Equally importantly there is the increased capacity in the service sector to support change. Many individuals – whether through choice or not – were forced to 'raise the bar' in order to help their clients and the community cope with the 'unchosen change'.

The principles of a good practice change program still stand when the change is unchosen. However, the keys are that the intensity and speed is greater. It helps to identify early those in the community that have the most to contribute to the response effort (leading service providers and farmers) and use their experience to guide the team generating the appropriate response. Conditions change quickly – and the response planning needs to keep up with the changes.

The advice would be plan big and hope you don't have to use all your plans. Build on your understanding of yourself, region, clients, networks, industry and collaborators and be ready for some surprises. Take as many people with you as you can and be prepared to lead.

Acknowledgements

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