

Local farmer partnerships

**** Please note: this transcript has been prepared from an audio recording of the seminar. While all care has been taken, 100 percent accuracy cannot be guaranteed.**

**** The first couple of minutes of this session were not recorded and therefore do not appear transcribed below.**

**** Unfortunately the final speaker, Ian McClelland, BCG Chairman, was not recorded and does not appear transcribed below. Notes provided by Ian McClelland have been included instead.**

Paul Wellar, VFF

...can become difficult to manage however. As the old saying goes, “You can never keep all the people happy all the time.” We will therefore occasionally disappoint those who disagree with the stance being taken on an issue. We have been lucky that the vast majority of our members have the maturity to understand that we are not, and can not afford to be, a single issue organisation. Our strength lies in having good working relationships with government and the broader agricultural industry. The VFF is primarily a policy and service-based lobby group. This is our role in Victoria while other groups handle the research, extension and on-farm aspects. The VFF tackles a huge range of the big issues affecting farming, namely vegetation legislation, weed control, OH&S legislation, access to technology, truck licences, transport restrictions, shire rates and rail access are just some of the issues we are currently working on on behalf of farmers.

These issues can often seem a little removed from the day-to-day running of the farm. But as you are all aware, they are getting closer and closer to the farm-gate every day. The VFF has a team of dedicated elected representatives who essentially volunteer their time to work with staff and come up with action plans for more positive outcomes for members.

Going forward, the challenge is going to be standing together on the issues that matter. If we accept that there will be differences of opinion, we can move on to working together on the big picture issues.

I can't imagine any farmer who believes the amount of red tape farmers are being burdened with will lead to improvements in farm productivity. Therefore, we have a point of consensus - this is a strength.

I can't believe any farmer agrees that city-based bureaucrats know more about farming than farmers do – another point of consensus.

Yes, there are some farmers who are deliberately and repeatedly behaving in a way that is unwise. However, the lowest common denominator should not decide on the fate for the rest of us.

Surely, we can all agree that weed and pest management rules which apply to farmers should apply to government-managed land.

The government's concept of user pays should apply equitably. If you are not receiving or using a particular service, you shouldn't have to pay.

There are so many issues that we, as farmers, can agree on. This is the first step in taking that control of our industry. The next step is working together to make sure our voice is heard. Apathy is not an option. Something we must all be aware of is the influence of single-issue activist groups. This is a new age where communication is the key. No longer is it the silent majority who are given space in the considerations of government decisions. The well-oiled campaigning and stunt-pulling activist

groups are having a great sway over the decision-making process of government, that most would consider they deserve. They don't play the same rules as we all do; they make outrageous demands, provide unsound facts and use emotive arguments. Unlike groups like the VFF, the BCG, and GGA and others, they do not have to provide transparent information about their finances. No annual report is publicly available outlining their funding resources and sponsors. They are accountable to no-one. They do not have that democratic policy-setting process; they make wild claims about how many people and who they represent, even though they are really self-appointed directors and representatives of a group of ten or so individuals.

I make these comments because it is important we as farmers understand what we are up against. These groups can yell loudly enough to each get representatives on to government committees. These are the people who will stop at nothing to have farming completely controlled by government. They refuse to recognise science-based evidence and believe anyone who doesn't agree with them is biased. These tactics are very effective with a bureaucracy that has little experience with rural Victoria.

Unless the real farmers stand up and be counted, we will have lost any control over our land.

The networking together of all the legitimate farming groups is going to be one of the most important activities in the future. Those of us who represent the interests of real farmers must work together. The worst thing we as farmers can do is allow government or industry to divide and conquer. It is extremely important the VFF works with other groups representing different facets of farming. Both our elected members and staff are spending more time developing relationships to ensure that communication lines are open. This is always a two-way street however. In other states, well-meaning groups of farmers have formed splinter groups. This was done in most cases with the best intentions, but all that it has led to is their governments refusing to listen to anyone on that basis – the basis that they don't represent the majority of farmers. Western Australia is a sad example. Western Australian Farmers Federation and the Pastoralists and Graziers Association frequently come out on opposite sides of the fence on most issues. Consequently, most farmers are members of neither. The government doesn't have to be accountable to the farming community.

If the farmers are to have a say in the numerous red tape requirements being foisted on us by bureaucrats trying to justify their continual employment, then we have to stand together.

There are times when the co-ordinated actions of farmers are required to get a response. Last year the VFF Grains Group called on farmers to send letters to government regarding the impact of their new chain of responsibility laws.

I have spoken at length about the environmental challenges, the increasing drag of red tape and well-meaning, but often ill-conceived regulation (these will continue to grow), and the governments who will claim they are responding to community demand will feel only greater obligation to increase the intensity of this direction. The sector will continue to be a global player on world markets but as the playing field levels out on world markets, or further skews depending on your thinking, perhaps with some help from the world leaders, the grains industry will face greater challenges from international competition.

It is inevitable that there will be fewer grain farmers farming in Australia in the future, and from a perspective of being heard by government, strong representation will be critical. Membership of organisations such as the VFF will be absolutely vital to

ensuring that the voice of the grains industry is heard. As the challenges about crops and GM, and water, fuel, transport, become more amplified, winning the hearts and minds of the consumer across the continent will likewise become increasingly critical. The VFF has recognised the importance of this proposition and has already changed much of what we do to meet the new challenges. We have recognised the need to meet on the same playing field as some of the campaign-savvy activist groups. Our metropolitan media management has intensified in recent years and we are now widely regarded through all metropolitan media as the first point of call for rural media enquiries. This is critical because in order to succeed we will need to bring the urban communities who rely on our produce, but who also have little or no understanding or empathy with the farm sector.

We farmers have survived some of the toughest years on record. I believe we still have many challenges ahead – different groups have different roles and different areas of expertise – it is important that we all recognise what our roles are. Then, rather than trying to be everything to everyone, we let others lead where their strengths lay. If we all work towards a common goal and keep communicating, we can ensure ‘divide and conquer’ methods won’t work. Farmers already make up the minority of Victorians, let’s not make it easier for governments to avoid being accountable to us.

Q. Paul, I was a bit surprised, I don’t think that GGA represent ten individual; I think it’s very democratically selected. Did you say that Paul, that GGA is undemocratic?

No, I didn’t say that. I focused on that the VFF were democratically elected and that we have grass-roots members making the decisions for the VFF – I didn’t focus on the GGA. I think I said that groups like the VFF, BCG and GGA had to work together to achieve outcomes for the grains farmers.

Q. Paul, are we in an interlude in terms of farmer numbers? Fifty or sixty years ago we had very large numbers, and therefore, a great deal of political pull. Our numbers have declined dramatically so we no longer have that pull. Are we going to finish up have a situation arising, like the graziers of the 1800s, apparently few in number, enormous resources, wealthy, with a great deal of power as a result of that? Are we just in a very difficult in-between period, and perhaps if I can use an example, the cotton growers are getting very close to that grazier-type situation – large, wealthy, very influential in their particular part of the state. Are we just at an awkward in-between period?

What I would say is I agree that in 20 years time there’ll probably be half the number of farmers, but the farming and agricultural industries will still be very important to Australia for export dollars and employment and although there might be half the farmers, the support industries – the spray contractors, the fencing contractors, the fertiliser contractors – there will be quite a deal of employment and business activity around farming even though we might have less farmers. I think that’s the role where we all need to work together is to get the point across to, especially where the populations are in Melbourne and Sydney, the importance of the agricultural pursuits to Australia for export dollars and employment. If you don’t have us, there’s 250,000 less jobs in Victoria, there’ll be \$8billion less exports out of Victoria – all of those are important to the economy of Australia. As an industry we will be powerful because they’ll want to retain that.

Q. I put it to you that we shouldn't take the fact that there will be further reduction in farmer numbers, because I don't necessarily believe that's going to happen. I think farm ownership is going to change, but you will still need a substantial number of farmers, albeit that they might be working those farms under contract or lease or some other way. I think the capital structure of farming may change. The other point that I would make is for as long as we continue to assume and keep saying that the number of farmers is going to fall, and therefore almost give the impression that there isn't a future in farming, it will probably be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Someone said to me recently they realise now how much damage that they were doing to their own family succession situation continuing to say "Poor me, there's no future in this game" and then wondering why their kids all left home.

I think you and I agree. While I've said there may be less farms, I've said there won't be any less people employed. I come from the dairy industry, when I started dairying in 1979, you'd say "I haven't missed a milking for three years", you milked 100 cows and you did everything. Whereas now, you milk 600 cows and you have two days rostered off a week. You have specialists that do the breeding and nutrition. My daughters will have a more attractive lifestyle in dairying that my father, my grandfather or even I had because they will have a lifestyle (round bales rather than square, different tractors).

I won't move away from there'll be less farms, but there'll be as many people in the agricultural areas with contract businesses, they'll be bigger farms employing more people, but those people will have lifestyles. You'll have better lifestyles with greater returns because of the economies of scale.

We should be promoting the opportunities and the lifestyle that's there.

Ron Hards, Chairman GGA

We've had a long and productive partnership with the BCG through participation in your Farming Systems research. I had a quick look at it this morning and it is a credit to the Group – we look forward to some good results coming out of that into the future.

You've also developed our young CEO through his time working here for the BCG, into a very passionate and knowledgeable advocate for Birchip and for the grains industry, and I talk about Tony Eyres.

I particularly welcome the opportunity to talk about farming group partnerships because we, as an association, are going through a process of reassessing our future. We've put together a draft strategic plan, a Blueprint for the Future, which many of you would have received as GGA members. One of the themes of the Blueprint for the Future is for GGA to be more independent. How we gain that independence is largely up to the members. If GGA is strong and independent and seen to be an advocate for the grain growers without fear or favour, we can more effectively partner with other grower groups. There are many things that we have wanted to do on behalf of growers which are not possible because we are not considered as impartial or independent from Graincorp. While that hasn't directly impacted our ability to partner with Birchip in the past, there are probably some projects you might consider in the future Ian, where we would be a more effective partner if we were seen to be independent and impartial.

There is an immense amount of detail in the Blueprint about the sorts of things GGA should be doing in the future. We've talked to a lot of members more and more about getting this Blueprint in print, it's a draft, and we're certainly looking for more comment on it and on the whole issue. We're around all day with another session later and the stand as well.

Members want us to take a more active role in overseeing industry investment in research and development, making sure our breeding programs are delivering what our customers want in the future, making sure research levies are well spent.

Members want us to do more in the sustainability area, particularly in helping the grains industry communicate what we do to make our farms more productive but also sustainable.

Some of the members who contributed to the development of the Blueprint wanted us to have a long-term look at the cost of energy in farming, what the alternatives might be if these prices keep climbing. While Paul's organisation doesn't have the resources or the time perhaps to research blue-sky projects like this, GGA may be able to assist. At the same time, if we took this on, we would need to work with a farming systems group that knows a lot about energy consumption in different farming systems. And that is where Birchip might come in.

So I believe we need to work with state and regionally based farming groups to address problems that impact on all grain farmers. And we can have a win-win-win, for all our membership bases, many of whom may be the same people anyway.

Our members want us to deliver high-value, well-researched independent advice and information about all aspects of the grains industry. This is a big job that we can't do on our own. We will be much more effective working in partnership with other organisations.

In the future I think GGA could evolve to become more like a think-tank and a policy research centre for the grains industry. No-one else has the resources or the mandate to fulfil this role. If that is where GGA is headed, we will still need to work closely with regional groups, like Birchip, to deliver these projects.

The same goes with wider industry policy, we might have the resources to thoroughly research and investigate a policy matter about rail transport or about plant breeding, but we still need the political clout and the credibility of the VFF and other groups to influence government policy.

So while our members are working through the detail of the Blueprint, telling us what the priorities are for the next 10 or 15 years, it is clear to me whatever our programs and our activities are, we're going to need to partner with regionally based organisations to deliver that. The partnership will involve us bringing independent information and policy, plus some of our financial resources to assist groups, like Birchip or the VFF to deliver. This event and the whole of the BCG is a credit to all of you Ian, and your committee. Thank you for letting me participate in the day, I look forward to a great day and wish you all the best in the future.

Banjo Patterson, DPI

Thanks to the BCG for giving me the opportunity to talk to you today about future directions for DPI Grains, particularly in the context of regional and local farmer partnerships.

What I wanted to do was context where we think we're heading in the future in terms of our overall aim and our objectives, and after that I'd like to talk to you briefly about some of our major priorities for the next couple of years, with some discussion

on the reason for those priorities and also some mention of the sort of groups that we would look for collaboration with.

So firstly, the aim of DPI Grains, which of course sets where we should be heading in the future, is to assist the Victorian grains industry to develop more profitable and more environmentally sustainable production systems and to improve international competitiveness and market access. To achieve those aims, we have three objectives. Firstly, to develop new technologies and improve germ plasm for use in commercial breeding programs. Secondly, to help grain growers monitor their own resources and demonstrate environmental sustainability at a higher level. And thirdly to improve the skills and capabilities of grain growers and their communities to source new information and adopt their new technologies and practices that promote profitable and sustainable grain businesses.

That's our objectives that we hope to achieve over the next few years. How are we going to do those? To do that I'd like to move on to our priorities for the next couple of years. There are basically eight of these that I want to talk to you about, and as I said, I'll also give some reason why we've selected these and an idea of the sort of groups that we either are currently involved in, or in fact would look to develop greater collaboration in the future.

The first priority is to work on what's called root to market projects, where the grain extension staff, a number of whom are in the room today, really are the next users if you like of our R&D strategy. The reason for that is we are looking to increase the adoption rate of new knowledge and also capitalise on our significant investment in research. To give you some idea of the groups we are either currently working with or would look to work with in the future, a couple come to mind and this is by no means a complete list, the BCG in this case and also work we're doing with the Australian Barley Maltsters.

The second priority is to look at new practice change projects in grain, but the same comments equally apply to meat, horticulture and wool, to look at new practice change projects there that are supported by industry. That last bit – supported by industry – is most critical. The reason why this is selected as a priority is that extension if you like, or practice change or delivery network type work, currently we only have a satisfactory arrangement in place with the dairy industry, so we are looking to talk to organisations like GRDC in the case of grain, Horticulture Australia Ltd in the case of horticulture, MLA in the case of meat, and also Grape and Wine Research and Development. We're looking for investment and collaboration with those.

One of the groups that we've been talking about how we can strengthen those links is the TopCrop Advisory Group.

The third priority that we've identified is what you might call a farm monitor project for multi industries. It's a benchmarking exercise. We're looking really to expand that across all industries across the state. We do have a very large one in the wool industry at the moment, we're looking to make it multi industry and state-wide. The reason for that is we feel it's a very effective information resource for government and also industry, but once again, it needs to be widely supported by co-investment. The sort of collaborators that we've currently been using in this exercise are a network of private consultants.

The fourth priority are new regional projects with multiple outcomes. An example of this that some of you may be aware of is a national project called Grain & Graze. We're very keen on this approach because it does give multiple outcomes, it does have the potential for a diversity of co-funding partners. Our main collaborators on

this particular project at this stage are Southern Farming Systems, based in southwest Victoria, and Mallee Sustainable Farming, obviously based in the Mallee.

The fifth priority is one that revolves around climate change and climate variability practice change projects. The reason for this being selected a high priority area for government really is the need for government to invest in practice change to improve our knowledge of the various constraints caused by climate change or climate variability. Obviously this is one that links very closely with groups like the BCG, and we are currently engaged in some discussions on a new project proposal on this very topic with BCG.

The sixth priority are projects once again co-funded by industry that are aimed at achieving better rates of adoption or practice change. The reason why we need this is basically we're looking at getting continuous improvement in the tools and methodologies that are available to help increase the rate of uptake of new technology, practices and knowledge. I think it's fair to say that this is an area that we have had considerable resources in in the past, and we tend to work through a number of large farmer groups like the BCG, and the small farmer groups like the TopCrop network.

The seventh priority are some additional projects that assist industry with the implementation of the white paper on water. We as a Department, have a heavy focus on dairy and horticulture, but certainly mixed farming, particularly irrigated cropping, comes into this area. The reason why we think it is a priority is it looks as though it will need a much more sustained effort to meet the practice change objectives as outlined in that white paper on water. One of the collaborators that we're using here on a project that is getting fairly far along the pathway of being approved is the Victorian Irrigated Cropping Council.

The eighth and last priority that I want to mention are some new initiatives with significant public benefit outcomes. One that comes to mind is a rather large project on plant biosecurity that we're in the final stages of developing. The rationale for government investment in an area like this, they are prepared to support initiatives that do maintain market access for agricultural produce and also ones that deliver benefits to the people of Victoria as a whole. Collaborators on a project like this are expected to be the network of TopCrop groups and also links to the Victorian community at large.

I will be around for the rest of the day if anyone wants to discuss those in more details and I'd encourage you to visit our stand in the gymnasium.

Ian McClelland, BCG Chairman

Below are notes provided by Ian after his speech

Love or Money?

Love and making money are essential ingredients for our survival.

To make money only without.....

- Loving the job
- Liking the place where you live
- Being part of the community where you live
- Wanting to improve the land during your lifetime
- Having an interest in the beauty of the land, an interest in the birds, the trees the landscape
- Having a passion for farming in your area.

To love all these things without.....

- The essential knowledge and skills to farm successfully
- Understanding the effects of farming on the landscape and the environment
- Having the network of farmers, advisers, mentors to influence your decisions and to source information
- Good financial management
- Having an idea of what changes need to be made and opportunities grasped
- Market research and access to new technologies.

Success should mean loving life where we live plus making enough money to do the thing that we want to do.

These are essential ingredients of the BCG.... The Mission: “Improving profitability and long-term viability of Mallee and Wimmera communities through research, demonstration and exchange ideas amongst farmers and industry groups.”

That is why our interests from just agronomy and business management to improving the environment, making our communities a better place to live in, has become a complementary benefit of our work.

The BCG concentrates on

- Applied research
 - A focus on our region
 - Extension...sharing success and failures....marketing information.....giving information away
 - Bring people together in a melting pot where views are exchanged as equals between farmers , researchers and industry
 - Exchange of views bottom up and top down between researcher and farmers. ... influencing research priorities
 - Developing a passion for farming
 - Partnerships with our funding bodies and other institutions like the DPI
-sustainable communities.

We are non political!

Key words at the BCG are: local, risk management, community, focus, sharing, equality, for everyone, knowledge, change, innovation, understanding.....

We will work with anybody that has similar interests to solve problems and create opportunities for all farmers in our region.