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The Australian Rangeland Society

BESTPRAC

N.D. O'Dempsey¹, C.V. Beresford², N.J. Morris³ and D.R. Miller⁴

¹ QDPI, PO Box 282, Charleville Qld 4470

² 'Dynevor Downs', Cunnamulla Qld 4490

³ 'Kandimulla', Mitchell Qld 4465

⁴ QDPI, PO Box 519, Longreach Qld 4730

ABSTRACT

Queensland beef and sheep producers, the Queensland Department of Primary Industries (QDPI) and the International Wool Secretariat (IWS), with participation from CSIRO and NSW Agriculture, joined forces in July 1994 to examine the application of Participatory Problem Solving to the Queensland sheep industry. The participants agreed that wool-producer-driven groups developing best practices through facilitated action learning could improve the viability of wool producers and the adoption of appropriate technologies. The workshop adopted the name 'Bestprac' for this process.

Five Bestprac groups have been established throughout Queensland in a pilot project supported by the QDPI and the IWS. Key issues for the success of Bestprac have been identified.

INTRODUCTION

Now is a critical time for Queensland wool producers to take action to ensure their future viability. They have been financially weakened by low wool and cattle prices, as well as by drought. These producers also feel threatened by changing demands on their management of the land. It is however a time of opportunity, with rising medium-term wool market expectations and the development of new processes for collaboration between the QDPI and producers.

In recent years the wool industry has been looking for better approaches to extension, after recognising that there is a large body of information that could improve management that is currently not being used. Research could also be better targeted to address real industry problems within the context of management of the whole property.

A new initiative was pursued by the QDPI, based on strengthening participation between producers and research, development and extension services and utilising the principles of benchmarking best practices. This initiative we called Bestprac.

METHODS

Bestprac originated in 1994 at an IWS and QDPI sponsored workshop (O'Dempsey 1994) utilising the experiences of Richard Clark and producers active in Participatory Problem Solving (Clark and Filet 1994). With IWS and QDPI support, the Bestprac Steering Committee targeted five areas of Queensland for the establishment of Bestprac pilot groups. These were the Roma, Charleville, Cunnamulla, Longreach and St George areas.

Skills training to implement Bestprac was undertaken for interested QDPI staff and management and producers in a three day workshop in July 1995. During the workshop the techniques and processes (including benchmarking best practices) that will be used to set up and maintain Bestprac groups were demonstrated and practised (Miller and O'Dempsey 1996). The experience of producer and QDPI members of similar groups in the beef industry (Clark 1996) was utilised in the workshop.

To form the pilot Bestprac groups, QDPI staff approached key producers and explained the purpose and processes of Bestprac. If interest was shown, these producers were invited to nominate others

whom they would like in the team. A meeting was then called at which a short explanation of Bestprac was given, questions invited and the Bestprac group formed. Some groups had members visit and talk with similar groups (Clark and Filet 1994) operating in the beef industry.

The V-Gate Bestprac group has moved on to the next stage, which is the facilitated documentation of benchmarks of current best practices in their area (D.J. Jordan, pers. comm.). From this will flow the subsequent stage, the identification of key problems and opportunities and the formulation and testing of new practices to overcome or realise these.

DISCUSSION

‘You can’t teach an old dog new tricks’ - an old saying, but is it true? Participants (including QDPI staff) in Bestprac groups are already, even at this early stage, learning new ‘tricks’. The question is have they been taught or has an environment been created in which learning will occur. We think the latter.

Key issues identified for the success of Bestprac (Miller and O’Dempsey 1996) were:

- Bestprac involves changing attitudes, both of QDPI staff and producers;
- Bestprac must provide a safe environment for participation and learning;
- participants must have a clear vision of where the group is going;
- the process must be transparent, i.e. as open and honest as possible;
- Bestprac groups must have a clear understanding of the role of the QDPI and facilitators;
- the groups must have the skills needed to make the process successful;
- selling Bestprac and keeping the groups together are important for success; and
- commitment from QDPI management and communication with existing groups are essential.

Perhaps ‘You can’t teach an old dog new tricks’ but it certainly seems that ‘Old dogs can learn new tricks’.

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