

Final report

National Coordinator – Demonstrating beef sustainability credentials and fostering practice change

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Prepared by: Jo Jones
Pinion Advisory
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Meat & Livestock Australia Limited
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Abstract

Customers and other industry stakeholders are increasingly looking for evidence of sustainable production practices across agricultural industries. The ‘demonstrating beef sustainability credentials and fostering practice change’ project provided an opportunity for the development of a tool for beef producers to demonstrate the environmental sustainability of their production practices. The project gave producers and beef industry stakeholders an opportunity to design an environmental sustainability demonstration and learning platform that was simple, practical, user friendly, meaningful and voluntary. The project focussed on five environmental theme areas: tree cover, biodiversity stewardship, ground cover, carbon balance, and drought resilience. The project design incorporated producer and industry feedback and engagement throughout, with the project guided by an Advisory Group comprised of representatives from across the beef value chain, and co-design groups created to guide each theme development.

The project was funded for three years with a six-month extension (until January 2024) through the Australian Government’s Smart Farms program. It was delivered by a consortium led by Meat & Livestock Australia (MLA), with WWF-Australia and University of Queensland as partners, and Pinion Advisory engaged as project coordinators. Expertise from CSIRO and the Australian National University was brought in for key stages, and a platform development team consisting of Servian, RMCG and CiboLabs was engaged.

The key role of the National Coordinator was to coordinate, oversee delivery and report on the project activities. The National Coordinator was appointed by the project consortium and engaged soon after project inception. The Project Coordinator provided executive support to MLA as the lead organisation and supported coordination of all phases of the project. The project is now complete, and the core objectives of developing a national online platform for grassfed beef producers that enables them to access emerging markets by demonstrating their sustainability credentials, and to motivate grassfed beef producers to implement sustainability practice change through self-directed learning, have been successfully achieved.

Executive summary

Background

Customers and other industry stakeholders are increasingly looking for evidence of sustainable production practices across agricultural industries. The 'demonstrating beef sustainability credentials and fostering practice change' project provided an opportunity for the development of a tool for beef producers to demonstrate the environmental sustainability of their production practices. The project gave producers and beef industry stakeholders an opportunity to design an environmental sustainability demonstration and learning platform that was simple, practical, user friendly, meaningful and voluntary.

Objectives

The overall project aim was to enable growth in the value of and trust in Australian grassfed beef products and their production through demonstrating environmental credentials and fostering on-farm practice change. The Project Coordinator role was to coordinate, oversee delivery and report on the project activities.

Methodology

The Project Coordinator employed project management expertise to support the project consortium to achieve the overall goals of the project. A detailed workplan, risk assessment and mitigation plan, monitoring and evaluation plan, communications plan, and governance plan were all created to underpin the project activity. An Advisory Group and co-design groups for each theme provided input at relevant stages to guide the project and ensure the resulting platform was fit for purpose. An initial version of the platform was released for pilot testing in 2023. Beef producers from across Australia were able to pilot the platform using their own properties and provide feedback about usability, content and relevance. Feedback was analysed and shared with the platform developers to enable modification and improvement of the platform prior to its release.

Results/key findings

The resulting output of the project is a user-friendly platform which enables:

- i. Australian grassfed beef producers to demonstrate their environmental credentials;
and
- ii. learning pathways for producers that support continual improvement.

Benefits to industry

This project has the potential to enable the following significant outcomes:

- Australian grassfed beef producers are rewarded for demonstrating their environmental credentials to customers, consumers and the community.
- Australian grassfed beef producers are able to undertake self-directed learning to improve performance across five key environmental themes; and
- Australian grassfed beef producers are able to respond to other market drivers (for example but not limited to customer requirements, accessing farm loans or schemes etc.) requiring demonstrable environmental credentials.

Future research and recommendations

With further investment there is the possibility for future expansion of the platform to cater for other red meat industries as well as to support data gathering and reporting for additional credentials such as water use efficiency and animal welfare.

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1. Background

1.1 Project background

Customers and other industry stakeholders are increasingly looking for evidence of sustainable production practices. A challenge for beef producers and supply chains is how to demonstrate their sustainability credentials and achieve recognition without common standards and a common reporting system. A common system needs to support a pathway that fosters continuous improvement in production practices, and a coordinated approach, otherwise fragmented best management approaches and market schemes will continue to persist.

Using a co-development process that directly engaged stakeholders, this project aimed to deliver a national, opt-in common system for demonstrating land management and sustainability credentials. The system needed to include an opt-in online platform, guidance on standards, and learning modules to inform continual improvement. The national platform needed to utilise satellite imagery for verification of sustainability credentials and provide a solution for producers wishing to demonstrate sustainability performance to various markets against five areas:

1. Vegetation management
2. Ground cover and soil conservation
3. Biodiversity stewardship
4. Carbon balance
5. Drought resilience.

The project also aimed to document the general sustainability issues identified by members of the beef supply chain in order to provide the sustainability context from a business perspective that underpin the overarching project.

The project was funded for three years plus a six-month extension (until January 2024) through the Australian Government's Smart Farms program. It was delivered by a consortium led by Meat & Livestock Australia, with WWF-Australia and University of Queensland as partners, and Pinion Advisory engaged as the National Coordinator (more commonly referred to as the Project Coordinator).

To enable the project title to more accurately reflect the objectives of the project, the externally facing project title was changed to "Environmental credentials for Australian grassfed beef". This change occurred due to feedback received from the project Advisory Group.

2. Objectives

2.1 Project coordinator role objectives

The key role of the Project Coordinator was to coordinate, oversee delivery and report on the project activities. The key objectives were:

1. Professionally and efficiently co-ordinate the project and project activities to ensure the approved project objectives and KPIs are achieved on time and budget.
2. Develop and oversee execution of a detailed project implementation plan to achieve the project objectives.
3. Oversee the management of internal and external relationships that are critical to the success of the project, including the consortium members.
4. Design, coordinate and implement a monitoring and evaluation plan as per the Federal Government's requirements to enable continuous improvement and assessing the impact of the program.
5. Develop and implement a communications plan, in collaboration with MLA communication team to raise awareness and engage producers and other stakeholders in the co-innovation process.
6. Develop and monitor a risk management plan. Efficiently identify and manage risks.
7. Develop and implement a comprehensive stakeholder engagement plan to inform and keep industry stakeholders up-to-date on project progress.
8. Manage execution of the co-innovation process in collaboration with project partners.
9. Establish systems to coordinate and maintain regular communication between project partners, and with industry.
10. Organise and provide executive support and respond effectively to the requirements of the Advisory Group.
11. Provide regular reports to MLA on progress and draft reports for submission to the National Landcare program.

2.2 Overall project objectives

The overall project objectives as per the Australian Government grant deed obligations were:

1. Develop a national online platform for grassfed producers that enables them to access emerging markets by demonstrating their sustainability credentials.
2. Motivate grassfed producers to implement sustainability practice change through self-directed learning.
3. Provide a baseline for aggregated and de-identified national trends data for the beef industry across sustainability areas that can be used for monitoring, directing adoption and industry wide reporting.

3.0 Methodology

This report will detail the methodology relevant to the role of Project Coordinator in the project. The methodology of other aspects of the project will be covered in reports related to the other sub projects.

3.1 General project management

The Project Coordination team was made up of Leanne Sherriff and Jo Jones from Pinion Advisory working in a shared capacity until May 2023, and for the last portion of the project, Jo Jones alone.

A project email address was established for all email correspondence, and a shared file storage system set up for all project partners to access.

Regular project team meetings were set. Meetings were held fortnightly, with project management meetings held once a fortnight, and content meetings held on the alternate fortnight.

The monthly project management meetings were used to keep the project on-track. Standing agenda items at these meetings included action items from the previous meeting, workplan progress/review, risk assessment update and communications activities update. Additional items were added as required. The Project Coordinator drafted the agenda and assisted MLA to facilitate these meetings.

The monthly content meetings were scheduled on a fortnightly basis, or as required to review the detail underpinning key project deliverables. These meetings provide a forum to ensure consistency in delivery of the co-design activity and enable consortium input into other activities (such as platform developer Expressions of Interest process, etc). The Project Coordinator provided a minute taking service for these meetings and developed the agenda and supported MLA with facilitating meetings as required.

The Project Coordinator reported to MLA, the project lead. There were five Project Managers at MLA over the life of the project, and the Project Coordinator supported the transition between Project Managers.

3.2 Project management tools

A project workplan was established using Smartsheet, detailing the outputs agreed to in the Smart Farms grant, and the steps required to achieve them. All project team members had access to the project workplan, and the workplan was reviewed at monthly project team meetings. The workplan enabled monitoring of progress of all tasks and assisted in ensuring all deliverables from the Smart Farms Grant agreement were accounted for.

The Project Coordinator drafted a detailed risk assessment early in the project. This was regularly reviewed by the project team, and new risks added when necessary. The Project Coordinator would bring relevant risks to the attention of the project team during project management meetings.

A communications plan and monitoring and evaluation plan were drafted early in the project, and reviewed regularly. The communications plan informed the stakeholder engagement process throughout the project. The University of Queensland team and the Project Coordinator utilised the monitoring and evaluation plan to inform evaluation of the co-design phase and the platform pilot testing phase.

3.3 Advisory Group

A project Advisory Group was formed in May 2021 to guide the development of the platform and provide strategic input and advice to the project team, to ensure the resulting product meets the needs of users. A Terms of Reference was drafted and members were offered sitting fees in line with MLA policies.

The selection criteria for membership of the Advisory Group were:

1. Demonstrated national livestock industry networks.
2. Experience and/or demonstrated interest in sustainability in livestock production or processing systems.
3. Innovative/creative thinkers (move away from business-as-usual approaches).
4. Understanding of and/or experience in delivery/design of extension/learning programs for livestock producers.
5. Understanding the drivers behind producer and market interests in sustainability.
6. Previous involvement in steering committees or advisory groups.
7. A demonstrated collegial approach to working with others.
8. Willing to champion the demonstrating beef sustainability project amongst networks.

The Advisory Group members are shown in Appendix 1. The Project Coordinator was responsible for communicating with the project Advisory Group, developing the agenda for meetings, preparing material for sharing, facilitating some sessions during meetings, taking minutes and processing sitting fees.

Regular Advisory Group meetings held during the project, with all meetings conducted online. These were effective in providing strategic guidance and overarching industry perspective to the project team.

3.4 Co-design groups

Co-design groups were formed in September 2021 to assist with defining the scope of the themes and guide the development of the platform and learning modules. A Terms of Reference was drafted and members were offered sitting fees in line with MLA policies. An expression of interest process was used, and producers were asked to nominate their preferred theme to be involved with.

The selection criteria for membership of the co-design groups were:

Suitable *beef producer* working group members will have:

- Current established commercial grass-fed beef production experience (one or more of northern, southern or western production systems).
- A strong interest in demonstration of on-farm environmental performance.
- Strong beef producer and broader industry networks and a willingness to bring a broader perspective to the table.
- Demonstrated ability to work collaboratively as part of a working group.
- Experience with vertical integration/processor/customer end of the value chain would be an advantage.
- Experience using existing MLA platforms such as myMLA, myMSA or Livestock Data Link (LDL) is desirable but not essential.

Beef value chain stakeholders suitable for the working groups will have:

- A current working role in the Australian beef industry value chain relevant to demonstrating environmental performance e.g. sustainability manager, supply chain manager (or equivalent).
- A demonstrated interest in environmental sustainability of beef production systems.
- Strong beef industry networks and a willingness to bring a broader perspective to the table.
- Demonstrated ability to work collaboratively as part of a working group.
- Experience in delivering and/or sourcing sustainably produced agricultural products (beef or other).

The Project Coordinator managed the EOI process and prepared documents for the project team to use to assign members to groups.

The co-design lead (UQ) and respective theme leads were responsible for corresponding with the co-design members, and the Project Coordinator was responsible for processing sitting fees. The co-design group members are shown in Appendix 2.

3.5 Communications bursts

The Project Coordinator took the lead role in preparing the external communication updates and obtaining MLA approval prior to circulating according to the communications plan. They were responsible for preparing communication burst documents to share with stakeholders. These documents were prepared annually at a minimum, and occasionally a second was created when required. These documents aimed to provide an update on the progress of the project and encourage involvement from industry at key phases, for example registering for the co-design groups and piloting the platform. The Project Coordinator would prepare a draft, share it with the project team for feedback, and work with the MLA communications team members to finalise the documents.

Appendix 3 shows examples of the communication burst documents.

A log of all media and formal communications activity was kept and is shown in Appendix 4.

3.6 Platform design

The Project Coordinator was responsible for establishing the process to enable recruitment of the platform development team. An EOI document was prepared, outlining the scope, budget and timeframes of the project, and several responses were received. Applicants were requested to present a pitch to a selection panel. The Project Coordinator managed the pitch process, collated feedback from the selection panel, and communicated with applicants.

It became apparent that work was required to inform which of the five themes it was possible to create a credential from, based on existing credentials, access to remotely sensed data, ability for scalability and a tiered approach as requested by the co-design phase. It was also suggested that a Publicly Available Specification (PAS) was created for informing the biodiversity theme on the platform. A team from CSIRO were engaged to conduct this work. A steering committee was established to oversee this activity. A Terms of Reference was written for the Steering Committee and the committee met on four occasions to provide guidance and review progress. The Project Coordinator supported MLA in managing the steering committee and managing the progress of this phase of work, including setting online meetings, taking minutes and sharing meeting recordings.

The project coordinator did not have a key role in the actual platform design process, but did attend sprint meetings with the platform design team to ensure they could share progress with the project team.

The platform was required to be piloted with industry prior to it being finalised. An expression of interest portal was created for beef producers to pilot the platform and provide their feedback. The pilot testing process was outsourced to a third party through a formal call for service from MLA (a separate Pinion Advisory team were the successful providers appointed). The Project Coordinator was responsible for supporting MLA to create information for the pilot producer EoI process and in collating responses and passing these on to the platform pilot team.

3.7 Reporting to DAWE

The Project Coordinator was responsible for drafting all milestone reports and the final report to DAWE and ensure they were available for MLA to review and finalise at least four weeks prior to their due date. MLA was responsible for preparing the financial statements.

When additional information was requested by DAWE, the Project Coordinator would support the MLA Project Manager to prepare the information and progress until the milestone was approved. A total of seven milestone reports were prepared, as well as the final report.

4. Results

4.1 Meeting the objectives of the role

The Project Coordinator met key objectives of the role which were:

1. Professionally and efficiently co-ordinate the project and project activities to ensure the approved project objectives and KPIs were achieved on time and budget.
2. Develop and oversee execution of a detailed project implementation plan to achieve the project objectives.
3. Oversee the management of internal and external relationships that were critical to the success of the project, including the consortium members.
4. Design, coordinate and implement a monitoring and evaluation plan as per the Federal Government's requirements to enable continuous improvement and assessing the impact of the program.
5. Develop and implement a communications plan, in collaboration with MLA communication team to raise awareness and engage producers and other stakeholders in the co-innovation process.
6. Develop and monitor a risk management plan. Efficiently identify and manage risks.
7. Develop and implement a comprehensive stakeholder engagement plan to inform and keep industry stakeholders up-to-date on project progress.
8. Manage execution of the co-design process in collaboration with project partners.
9. Establish systems to coordinate and maintain regular communication between project partners, and with industry.
10. Organise and provide executive support and respond effectively to the requirements of the Advisory Group.
11. Provide regular reports to MLA on progress and draft reports for submission to DAWE.

The main outcome was the four-year project achieved the primary aim of delivering a national, opt-in common system for demonstrating land management and sustainability credentials. The system

includes an opt-in on-line platform, guidance on standards, and learning modules to inform continual improvement. The national platform utilises satellite imagery for verification of sustainability credentials and provides a solution for producers wishing to demonstrate sustainability performance to various markets against five areas:

1. Vegetation management
2. Ground cover and soil conservation
3. Biodiversity stewardship
4. Carbon balance
5. Drought resilience.

The *Environmental Credentials of Australian grassfed beef* platform was built through a robust co-design process, meaning it is designed by beef producers, for beef producers.

5. Conclusion

The project team are confident the following desired project outcomes have been achieved through the successful delivery of the project:

1. Australian grassfed beef producers are able to be rewarded for demonstrating their environmental credentials to customers, consumers and the community.
2. Australian grassfed beef producers are able to undertake self-directed learning to improve performance across five key environmental themes; and
3. Australian grassfed beef producers are able to respond to other market drivers (for example but not limited to customer requirements, accessing farm loans or schemes etc.) requiring demonstrable environmental credentials.

The project consortium, consisting of the three partners Meat & Livestock Australia (MLA), University of Queensland (UQ), and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) came together to work on creating a tool which would enable growth in the value of and trust in Australian grassfed beef products and their production through demonstrating environmental credentials and fostering practice change. The diversity in experiences, expertise and networks of the consortium members was a key element of success of the project. The Project Coordinator played an important role in supporting the project consortium to achieve their goals.

6. Future research and recommendations

A project objective of providing a baseline for aggregated and de-identified national trends data for the beef industry across sustainability areas that can be used for monitoring, directing adoption and industry wide reporting, was not achieved by the conclusion of the project timeframe, however this will be possible as the platform is launched and producers begin to use the platform and enter data. It is recommended that this platform capability is actioned as it will provide significant value to industry.

Throughout the extensive pilot testing and refinement phases of the project, ideas for future improvements and extensions of the platform outside the scope of the current project have emerged. A strong case exists for further investment to allow for additional innovation and design features to be added to the platform, and expansion of the learning framework to allow for greater education and practice change. MLA are keen to engage with future project partners to attract investment to allow for phase two of the project to be created.

There is opportunity for the platform capability to be expanded to cater for lamb and goat producers, as well as other themes of sustainability such as water use efficiency and animal welfare.

7. Appendix

Appendix 1 – Advisory Group membership

Appendix 2 – Co-design Groups membership

Appendix 3 – Communications burst documents

Appendix 4 – Media and communications log

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