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mla
MEAT & LIVESTOCK AUSTRALIA

final report

More Beef from Pastures state coordination – New South Wales

Executive summary

This report provides a summary of the state coordination of the More Beef from Pastures (MBfP) project running between January 2014 and December 2016. The overall goal of the program is to achieve a sustainable (economic and environmental) increase in kilograms of beef produced per hectare through optimal management of the feedbase.

The key imperatives that MBfP sought to address include:
1. Address the heightened needs of the red meat industry to remain competitive and sustainable in the face of a changing physical, financial and social environment;
2. Account for the variable and segmented nature of public and private sector research, development and extension (RD&E) resourcing and capability across the country;
3. Robustly align with, and extend applicable components of, the National Beef RD&E Strategy; and,
4. Be positioned as the preeminent southern beef communication and extension framework that enables the harvesting of new, and evaluation and attribution of existing, R&D ideas and investments.

The NSW state co-ordinator worked with the national co-ordinator, to develop, deliver and implement an annual plan to achieve the awareness, engagement and practice change targets. The state co-ordinator also delivered the monitoring and evaluation data necessary to demonstrate the impact of the program.

The state co-ordinator provided regional input into the design of MBfP activities and facilitated the engagement of deliverers and producers through their own schedule of local extension and communication events.

A number of processes were systemised to reduce the potential for misunderstanding of the key objectives and key processes and to improve the efficiency of record keeping and reporting. An information memorandum (IM) was developed and distributed to potential deliverers. The IM outlined program aims, deliverer responsibilities, state co-ordinator responsibilities and provided application details. Standard operating proceedures were also developed clearly articulating the processes and responsibilities from the point of application to receipt of funds. These processes were extremely useful and assisted in the resolution of issues as there was always a written point of reference to provide direction.

Engagement with deliverers was made by making phone contact with potential deliverers, sending the IM and making contact again once the IM had been read. A relatively small number of deliverers were responsible for the delivery of a large proportion of total events over the three year period. This is, to some extent, a reflection of the relatively small number of beef extension agents in NSW.

Key performance indicator (KPI) participation targets for the project which ran between January 2014 and December 2016 were exceeded for category A, B and C events.

Table 1 Key performance indicator participation targets were exceeded across all 3 categories

Activity category	Target KPI	Achieved KPI
Category A: Awareness	2690	4249
Category B: KASA change	403	1456
Category C: Practice change	333	635

The key industry benefits derived from this project will be improved beef profits and improved beef production per hectare. Approximately 50% of attendees indicated that they would engage in practice changes as a result of attending events. Examples of practice changes include tightening joining periods, changing calving date, vaccinating, condition scoring, start feed budgeting, wean earlier, start crossbreeding, more strategic soil testing, apply more fertiliser and re-evaluation of current stocking rates.

These changes , provided they are made after weighing the benefits relative to the costs will lead to more kilograms of beef produced per hectare and increased beef enterprise profits.

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1   Background

The key imperatives that MBFP sought to address include:
1. Address the heightened needs of the red meat industry to remain competitive and sustainable in the face of a changing physical, financial and social environment;
2. Account for the variable and segmented nature of public and private sector research, development and extension (RD&E) resourcing and capability across the country;
3. Robustly align with, and extend applicable components of, the National Beef RD&E Strategy; and,
4. Be positioned as the preeminent southern beef communication and extension framework that enables the harvesting of new, and evaluation and attribution of existing, R&D ideas and investments.

2   Project objectives

The objective of the MBfP program was to increase the kilograms of beef produced per hectare through optimal management of the feedbase.

To assist in achieving the overarching program objective, KPIs were set for state co-ordinators around producer engagement in the program, including the following KPIs: Activity category engagement (

- **Table** *1*);
- Monitoring and evaluation return rate (**Table** *3*) and
- Herd size (**Table** *4*).

3   Methodology

The NSW MBfP state co-ordinator conducted a program needs analysis which was used to prioritise resources for the best outcomes. Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) beef production data were collated and analysed. The data showed that the majority of beef cattle as a percentage of total numbers occur in the Border Rivers Gwydir, Central West, Namoi and Northern Rivers regions. When ranked into cattle by holding, the high priority regions include the Border Rivers Gwydir, Lachlan, Lower Murray Darling, Murray and Western region which covers approximately one third of the area of NSW in the north west corner of NSW.

Issues facing the beef sector were identified to further establish which MBfP modules to prioritise for funding applications. The issues identified were the loss of state government supplied extension services, regional drought in the north and north west of the state during the delivery period and production issues highlighted in the MLA-commissioned southern beef and prime lamb situation analysis. At a production level, the key issues identified include low levels of feed utilisation, the ability to prioritise per hectare production over per-head production, labour efficiency and cost of production. Marketing related issues such as the ability to consistently meet market specifications were also identified.

These production related issues were then aligned with modules in the MBfP manual. This allowed for a more targeted campaign of recruiting deliverers based on the highlighting of the needs of the industry and program.

An information memorandum (IM) was developed. This included definitions of success measures, clarity surrounding monitoring and evaluation requirements, an outline of funding amounts and criteria, an activity application and budget form and a call to action.

The IM provided the framework for discussions with potential service providers. All known potential service providers were contacted by phone, or in person, to explain the project and its aims. The aim was to establish the level of deliverer availability and support. Service providers included private sector consultants, government extension agents, retail animal health suppliers, industry bodies, government organisations and various other industry interest groups.

Once initial contact was made, the IM was sent to potential deliverers.

Producer Advocates in the program were also contacted however they were made aware that there was unlikely to be a high level of demand for their involvement. All producer advocates agreed to contribute, where appropriate, to the program. As the program progressed alternative advocates who had attended events were sought for case studies and program endorsements.

When the deliverer network had been established an event plan was developed. This plan outlined the expected number of participants by category by date. This ensured that at any

point in time it was known what number of KPI targets had been met and what number was outstanding. It also allowed for the identification of the MBfP modules that were being delivered and the localities that events were being delivered in. This allowed for deliverer recruitment efforts to be expended more vigourously in those areas highlighted in the needs analysis.

The amount of funding available for events was apportioned by event category ensuring that the program funding pre-requisites were met. That is, category A events were eligible for up to 100% of the total cost of the event, category B events were eligible for no more than 40% of the gross cost of the event and category C events were eligible for no more than 20% of the gross cost of the event. The state co-ordinator placed expectations of maximum event expenses per participant of $80, $100 and $150 for category A, B and C events respectively based on target levels of participation and evaluation compliance. These event expense expectations could be exceeded but only if other event funding requirements were far lower than these expectations.

Once deliverers had submitted funding applications and budgets they were reviewed by the state co-ordinator. Funding applications were made on a pro-forma template which requested a statement of the learning outcomes and the alignment of the material with modules in the MBfP manual. Each applicant was also made aware of the need for the material to be supported by science and delivered in a non-commercial context.

The budget funding application consisted of a template requesting detail surrounding the level of income and expenses (itemised) and the level of funding being sought. The state co-ordinator scrutinised the budget to ensure that the budget calculations were correct, the total funding being sought was realistic and aligned with program expectations and that the cost per participant was consistent with the targets.

Due to the level of errors in budget calculations by deliverers a move was made from a word based document to an excel based document with calculations made in the template.

If applications did not meet program objectives or budgets were unrealistic the deliverer was contacted by phone by the state co-ordinator to explain the misunderstandings. In each case it was possible for the state co-ordinator to realign the expectations of the deliverer based on the expectations of the program and its funding source (MLA).

Once applications were successful deliverers were contacted and an information package was sent via email. This information package included the standard operating procedures for deliverers, the pre and post evaluation forms depending on the event, example knowledge and skills questions, example confidence questions and an activity debrief form.

The standard operating procedures highlights in detail the processes and expectations of timings of the deliverer and state co-ordinator pre and post event. This document included critical information surrounding branding, monitoring and evalution, development of knowledge and skills questions, data collection, payment and invoicing.

Deliverers of category B and C events were responsible for the development of knowledge and skills questions designed to re-inforce the key points of the event. These were scrutinised by the state co-ordinator prior to delivery. First time deliverers rarely met the

needs of the program when developing these questions however once they were familiar with the format and aims they became competent at developing suitable questions.

On completion of the course the corrected evaluation forms were forwarded to the NSW state co-ordinator for scrutiny and entering into the database. Prior to the standard operating procedures being developed there were significant inefficiencies in data collection and delivery. The standard operating procedures outlined the requirements in writing thus reducing the chance of miscommunication in program needs.

Monitoring and evaluation data was entered in to the MLA template and forwarded at pre-determined intervals for reporting. The state co-ordinator checked that the reports received back from MLA were consistent with their own data processing format.

4 Results

The NSW state co-ordinator exceeded the participation KPI targets set for three year project time frame in all three categories of event activity. Table 2 shows that participation levels exceeded the KPI targets by 58% for category A activities, 261% for category B events and 91% for category C events.

Table 2 Percent of 3 year target achieved for number of participants in Category A, B and C activities

	Category A	Category B	Category C
Participation KPI	2690	403	333
Participation actual	4249	1456	635
Actual % KPI	158%	361%	191%

Table 3 shows a number of performance measures for NSW MBfP. The data shows that participation rates exceeded expectations despite difficulties engaging high numbers of deliverers of MBfP events in NSW. The average number of participants per event was 45 per category A activity, 20 per category B activity and 11 per category C activity. Satisfaction and value ratings were high across event categories suggesting that the rigour imposed by the state co-ordinator on events meeting producer needs delivered value. Evaluation completion rates were high and this was largely due to a concerted effort demonstrating the importance of evaluation to deliverers and the SOPs (standard operating procedures) ensuring that the needs of the program were articulated clearly.

Table 3 MBfP NSW state co-ordinator performance measures

	Category A	Category B	Category C
Number of events	62	73	2
Participation	2771	1456	22
Average no participants/event	45	20	11
Satisfaction rating (1-10)	8	8.7	8.7
Value rating (1-10)	7.4	8.4	8.4
Evaluation completion KPI	65%	80%	80%
Evaluation completion actual	76%	90%	100%

Knowledge and skills scores pre-event in NSW were 30% while post event this increased to 87% suggesting that there was a high level of knowledge and skills change on average.

Table 4 MBfP NSW state co-ordinators herd size KPIs

	Herd size		
	100-400	**400-1600**	**1600+**
Herd size KPI (% target N^{o}s)	18%	40%	37%
Herd size target numbers*	448	996	922
Herd size actual (% target N^{o}s)	34%	37%	11%
Herd size actual numbers	1,070	1,163	332

*Based on target KPI numbers

Herd size KPIs when measured as a percentage of total participants were not met with a greater proportion of participants falling in the 100 to 400 head category than in the >1,600 plus category. The 400-1,600 head category KPI was just below the target. However if the target is assessed on an absolute numbers basis, due to actual numbers of participants exceeding target numbers, then the only target not met was the 1,600 plus category.

5   Discussion

5.1.1 Project objectives as per the contract

1. State Business Plan – Annual business plans were conducted as per the contract and these framed the workplan from which events were funded.

2. State Business Plan implementation – The business plan was implemented which involved the liaison and engagement of deliverers, building relationships and setting deliverer expectations and assisting deliverers to meet the needs of the program.

3. Monitoring and evaluation – NSW had the highest level of monitoring and evaluation compliance of participating states due largely to the communication of program objectives and the selling of the importance of monitoring and evaluation to the program. The monitoring and evaluation also was useful to the deliverers in understanding their ability to deliver extension messages.

   Identifying case studies to measure impact. The state co-ordinator supplied several case studies and content on request. Many of these were delivered across a range of media to a very broad network.

   All events (category A, B and C) will have an event record which will be provided to MLA using the standard Excel spreadsheet. This was completed on time and in a means that required very minimal double handling.

5.1.2 Webinars

Webinars were introduced at a relatively late point in the project but they were extremely successful. These were a highly efficient and useful tool in delivering messages to participants who otherwise may not have been exposed to the project. They also presented an opportunity to feed into category B activities. The learnings from the webinar events follow:

1. A significant amount of time is required for administration and marketing of these web-based events. The greater the investment in time the greater the audience participation appears to be.
2. The 7.30 pm evening time slot suits the majority of participants.
3. Keeping the presentation to a timeframe of less than 30 minutes has been a feature appreciated by the participants. Questions continue for at least another 15 minutes.
4. Webinar platforms are full of flaws that can be highly costly mainly due to the time required in fixing platform based problems.
5. Webinar recordings are a great way for participants to be further exposed to the program but they rob MBfP state co-ordinators of KPIs. The reason for this is that there is no way to conduct a survey, like the one held at the conclusion of the live webinar, at the closing of the recorded webinar. Given that more participants view recordings than live webinars this is a major lost opportunity for the program.
6. A single producer complaint regardless of the perceived size of the issue, even if dealt with diplomatically, has the potential to derail a successful event series. Keeping records and articulating rationale for processes goes some way to reducing complaint fallout.
7. There is a need for a set of procedures outlining MLA demands surrounding branding and marketing and IP ownership for webinars.
8. There is a need for a set of procedures regarding hosting of webinars on the MLA website.

5.1.3 Challenges

One of the key challenges faced over the course of the program was the lack of engagement of NSW deliverers with either – the technical skills for delivery or the willingness to commit to the program. This was demonstrated at one point in the program when 85% of the events held at that point were instigated by only three deliverers. At the same point 58% of events were instigated by one deliverer.

The restructure of the state department of agriculture and catchment management authorities into the Local Land Services (LLS) presented some challenges in engaging LLS deliverers.

The key issues identified in encouraging LLS officers to commit to the MBfP program appeared to be:

- the roles of staff who have the technical skills to deliver were only defined after the final rollout of MBfP.
- Many LLS appeared to have short term funding available for extension services so the funding from MBfP was perceived to be surplus to needs.

- Each LLS has different priorities leading to differences in demand for the program between LLS regions.

Several calls for expressions of interest in delivery of MBfP were circulated to NSW LLS officers throughout the program with the IM and application forms attached.

Commercial extension agents are likely to have the closest relationships with potential participants but their ability to extract value and deliver non-commercial messages appears to be one of the biggest challenges. The biggest success in this space was the relationship with Zoetis who realised that there was value in the events even in the absence of a direct sales focus.

5.1.4 Reproactive

Another very successful event series was the Reproactive workshops supported by Zoetis. These workshops use veterinarians in a mix of theoretical and practical sessions held on farm to demonstrate some of the key considerations regarding reproduction in beef cattle. The outsourcing of the technical delivery to veterinarians while leaving the administrative and marketing component to the Zoetis representative results in a highly successful partnership.

The instigation of these workshops was largely the result of a relationship built between Jock Munro of Zoetis and the NSW MBfP state co-ordinator. The success of the workshops was largely a function of the following:

1. Zoetis investing in the development of a workshop with a mixed practical and theoretical component by outsourcing content to well-regarded technical experts.
2. Zoetis ensuring that local veterinarians and other technical experts conduct the delivery of the content but providing them with a template/guide.
3. Zoetis taking responsibility for the registrations and collection of the evaluation data.
4. The NSW MBfP state co-ordinator investing time with Jock Munro to upskill him in the use of the Eventbrite registration platform. This improved his efficiency by reducing the double handling of evaluation data entry.
5. The NSW MBfP state co-ordinator providing clear and objective standard operating procedures and guidelines.
6. The NSW MBfP state co-ordinator articulating that delivery is expected to be impartial with no emphasis on company specific products.

6 Conclusions/recommendations

6.1 Recommendations

6.1.1 Implementing systems

Holmes Sackett implemented a number of processes that were not compulsory but resulted in significant improvements in project efficiency. Some of these processes follow.

Compiling an IM for deliverers. This document contained all the necessary information regarding the project, requirements of state co-ordinators, requirements of deliverers,

monitoring and evaluation and the application process inclusive of an application form for filing.

Compiling a deliverer budget template in MS Excel with an example completed budget. Our experience, prior to having a budget template in Excel, was that many deliverer budgets were calculated incorrectly. Having the budget in Excel allowed for ease of checking that the total funding requirements were consistent with the budget outputs. It also allowed for ease of checking the budget calculations added up correctly.

Compiling a written set of operating procedures for deliverers. This documented the program requirements, timings, delivery expectations, payment timings and monitoring and evaluation requirements of the deliverers. This was circulated after funding applications were received with the monitoring and evaluation documentation and resulted in clear directives thereby minimising the opportunity for mis-communication between deliverers and the NSW state co-ordinator. It is likely that this documentation along with the linking of payments to completed monitoring and evaluation assisted with high evaluation compliance rates.

Compiling an deliverers information package. This documentation included operating procedures, monitoring and evaluation forms and post event activity debrief form.

I recommend ensuring that such processes are in place prior to delivery of future programs as these processes clearly articulate the requirements of each party thereby minimising the potential for miscommunication.

6.1.2 Recommendations for Webinar events

Webinars are a highly effective means of delivering information to farm business managers in diverse geographical locations. The cost of the behind-the-scenes administration of Webinars however cannot be underestimated. Overall the webinars were highly successful in extending the MBfP program to participants who had previously had low exposure to the program and to exposing many participants to a webinar experience for the first time.

Several issues with webinars were experienced during the course of the webinar series. These issues were time consuming and inefficient and occurred largely the result of a lack of MLA policy and procedures surrounding webinars.

These included:

- MLA branding requirements not being met.
- Technological constraints leading to video of the webinars being delayed.
- Technological constraints leading to evaluation data not being captured from those who viewed webinars as videos after the live event.
- Controversial statements that may not have aligned perfectly with MLA views being made by webinar participants or deliverers.
- A lack of understanding of requirements surrounding webinar branding, IP ownership and webinar video hosting.

I recommend that MLA develop clear policy and procedures surrounding branding, technological requirements, hosting requirements, video capture and hosting rights. I

recommend that MLA also either develop policies briefing every webinar deliverer and participant on acceptable and unacceptable commentary or engage a moderator for every webinar or accept that it is impossible to control what is said by deliverers and participants at a webinar. Deliverers can not be expected to control comments while also maintaining all the other responsibilities of webinar management and delivery.

6.1.3 Recommendations - Monitoring and evaluation

The monitoring and evaluation process adopted during the program was highly inefficient and time consuming. Part of the reason for the inefficiency was the apparent lack of investment in streamlined data capture systems allowing for systemised online data capture.

Deliverers stated that the movement of registrations for MBfP events to online platforms such as Try Booking or Eventbrite allowed for far more efficient pre-event data capture, handling and processing. The reason for this was that all data was provided and handled electronically and there was less time required to process from hand written forms to electronic forms. These systems however come at a significant administration and processing cost.

Some participants attended more than 10 events during the funding round. Each time one of these participants attended they were required to enter their enterprise and production data. This is not only time consuming but frustrating for participants and makes the selling proposition of the evaluation process to farm participants more difficult for deliverers.

I recommend a streamlining of, at the very least, the production and enterprise evaluation data collection process. This would allow for a unique identifier matching the participant with previously entered data. This would populate previously-entered data fields pre or post event thereby negating the need for participants to enter the production and enterprise data every time they attend an event.

I recommend investment in an MLA event registration platform that allows for pre-event capture and procession for all of the event data capture and evaluation with access to evaluation data by deliverers.

6.1.4 Recommendations – Deliverer incentive

During the program there were very few category C activities run. The key reason for this was that there was no commercial incentive to run category C activities. Deliverers had the option of delivering category B activities that were eligible for 40% funding or category C that were eligible for only 20% funding (% of total event costs). There was a commercial imperative disincentivising delivery of category C events. My recommendation is to change the funding arrangements to avoid funding disparity between event categories.