



Final report

‘Back to Business’ Bushfire Recovery – West Australian coordinator

Project code: L.ADP.2006
Prepared by: Edward Riggall
AgPro Management
Date published: 20/11/20

PUBLISHED BY
Meat and Livestock Australia Limited
PO Box 1961
NORTH SYDNEY NSW 2059

Meat & Livestock Australia acknowledges the matching funds provided by the Australian Government to support the research and development detailed in this publication.

This publication is published by Meat & Livestock Australia Limited ABN 39 081 678 364 (MLA). Care is taken to ensure the accuracy of the information contained in this publication. However MLA cannot accept responsibility for the accuracy or completeness of the information or opinions contained in the publication. You should make your own enquiries before making decisions concerning your interests. Reproduction in whole or in part of this publication is prohibited without prior written consent of MLA.

Abstract

The recent bushfires in NSW, ACT, WA, Victoria, Tasmania and South Australia have affected an estimated 26,000 livestock producers. MLA initiated a number of activities to support producers through the bush fire recovery phase, including this project ‘Back to Business’ (BtB). BtB involved funding free one on one support with a local farm management consultant for up to three sessions to provide tailored support to develop individual plans to help get their business back on track.

The strategy aligns with the recent MLA Accelerated Adoption Initiative and will aim to address the immediate needs of affected livestock producers. It will also form the foundation for engaged producers to continue with longer term MLA programs that aim to build their management skills and capability. This initiative seeks to increase the resilience of producers for the current and future natural disasters that are likely to occur, including drought.

Producers had access to a farm management consultant for up to three sessions to review their situation and make a plan to get them back to business. AgPro was contracted to assist in identifying suitable consultants, connecting producers with consultants and general reporting to MLA.

In WA we had low uptake of the program as there was only a small amount of fires that impacted on farm businesses to a significant level. The business that took up the program has found it highly beneficial and is wanting to continue planning into the future (see feedback form).

The project ensured that support was available to all businesses in WA, this was an excellent opportunity for all of industry particularly in light that stock numbers in Western Australia have been diminishing in recent years. There is also a ‘feel good’ aspect for those affected by fires in WA, to know that despite attention focusing on the eastern states’ fires, there is recognition of local hardship, and programs in place to help them get back on their feet.

It is recommended that the boundaries of this project are extended to other natural disasters including drought. Much of the southern Wheatbelt has endured three extremely poor seasons, which in context of our environment (Mediterranean) could be classed as drought. Livestock production is diminishing as a result and system changes are required to manage the situation. Helping producers to recognise needed changes through this project would be greatly beneficial.

Table of contents

Abstract.....	2
1. Background.....	4
1.1 Background and aim	4
1.2 Approach.....	4
2. Objectives	4
3. Methodology	4
3.1 Proposed session outlines.....	5
3.2 Longer term.....	5
4. Results	6
4.1 Reaching out	6
4.2 Uptake.....	6
4.3 Participants	6
5. Conclusion	6
5.1 Key findings.....	6
5.2 Benefits to industry.....	7
6. Future research and recommendations.....	7
7. Appendices	8
7.1 Appendix 1: Murray Action plan session 1	8
7.2 Appendix 2: Murray Action plan session 2	11
7.3 Appendix 3: Murray Action plan session 3	12
7.4 Appendix 4: Murray feedback form.....	12

1. Background

1.1 Background and aim

The recent bushfires in NSW, ACT, WA, Victoria, Tasmania and South Australia have affected an estimated 26,000 livestock producers (approx. 57,000 PICs). MLA initiated a number of activities to support producers through the bush fire recovery phase, including partnering with state departments to deliver information sessions, setting up a web portal on the MLA website for information that is easy to find, and allocating sponsorship funding towards information sessions that will support producers in the bushfire affected regions.

In addition to these initiatives, MLA funded free one on one support with a local farm management consultant for up to three sessions to provide tailored support to develop an individual plan to help get their business back on track.

1.2 Approach

The strategy aligned with the recent MLA Accelerated Adoption Initiative and aimed to address the immediate needs of affected livestock producers. It also formed the foundation for engaged producers to continue with longer term MLA programs that aim to build their management skills and capability. This initiative sought to increase the resilience of producers for the current and future natural disasters that are likely to occur, including drought.

2. Objectives

The clear objective of the program was to get the producers “back to business” ASAP. This was through them having access to farm management consultants to help establish a way out of the immediate situation as well as establishing plans to strengthen the business in the long term.

3. Methodology

Impacted producers had free access to a farm management consultant for up to three sessions. A farm management consultant is considered to be an experienced consultant that specialises in farm business management with in-depth understanding of livestock farming systems from an integrated technical and financial perspective. The suggested outline of each session is detailed below, though the program ensured flexibility given the variation in individual farm circumstances and operations.

Importantly it is farm management consultants that needed to be engaged for this program, to ensure producers get the depth of service and technical advice they required to get the “farm business” back on track. The consultants engaged by MLA aimed to complement and build on any rural counselling services that are now available.

This program commenced in January 2020 and although aimed to conclude at the end of June 2020, continued until December 2020 in order to reach more producers.

3.1 Proposed session outlines

Session 1.

- General farm visit to review situation and determine immediate high-level priorities (stocktake). Provide support in identifying and applying for applicable funding available (suggest consultant uses admin staff to complete the applications or any rural counsellors in the region) – note the approach here could be that the consultant puts people in contact with them to help complete applications for funding in between the visits. A support phone call from the consultant’s office to check that things are progressing over time is also recommended.
- Provide an information pack that contains fact sheets on general recovery considerations, mental health support etc. This could include a checklist that runs through the avenues for support – particularly how to access cash, stock feed, subsidies and cost exemptions.
- Provide an overview of the next session plus determine any other support required.

Session 2.

- Within two weeks of session 1 or sooner
- Farm visit to complete (suggested):
 - Budget and cash flow
 - Livestock plan – keep, feed or sell?
 - Pasture and feed budgets, pasture establishment
 - Infrastructure rebuild plan
 - Other areas identified
 - Determine any additional support required
 - Develop an action plan for recovering

Session 3.

- Suggested to occur within a month of Session 2. Establish progress on action plan and identify any further support required.
- Determine ways to remain in contact.
- Short evaluation to be completed.

3.2 Longer term

The duration of engagement for the free service was suggested to be over an eight-week period. Ideally, producers will progress to MLA adoption programs, particularly long term practice change programs such as Profitable Grazing Systems (PGS), which promote supported and experiential practice change. Local producer group engagement should be encouraged using MLA’s sponsorship funding over time.

4. Results

4.1 Reaching out

The project involved making sure that impacted producers were aware of the program. This involved emails to the WA branch of the Australian Agricultural Association Consultants (AAAC) to ensure all WA consultants had information needed for eligible clients. In addition, we directly contacted all consultants in the affected areas, as well as reaching out to key producers and groups in the areas- the Stirlings and Katanning bushfire brigade. We also utilised AgPro’s networks, with Twitter, WhatsApp and direct emails.

4.2 Uptake

In WA we had low uptake of the program, with only one participant, and an additional three enquiries. It is believed that this is due to a combination of factors, however overall, only a small amount of fires impacted farm businesses to a significant level. In W.A. most of the major fires were contained to national parks, with minimal damage to surrounding farms. In addition, the timing of fires in the Katanning area that impacted farms coincided with seeding and COVID-19. Producers seemed to “just get on with it”, or perhaps were in shock and focused on the job at hand rather than utilising offered help.

4.3 Participants

The participant requested Ed Riggall as their consultant (conflict of interest attached in Appendix 1). Their action plan from each session is outlined in Appendices 2,3 & 4.

Feedback is summarised below, as well as attached as Appendix 5:

- Financial and whole of farm planning, as well as feed budgeting
- Positive change in business due to program
- Delivered in person and via web meeting, gauged to be successful
- Would recommend, and are very likely to continue to utilise consultants
- Ranked the advice given, improvement in knowledge and response time as 8 out of 10
- Ranked level of support, consultant and increase in confidence as 9 out of 10
- 10/10 ranking for overall satisfaction and level of support from the program
- Would like information about other MLA programs/workshops

Comments: “it was a tough time, and great to have flexibility in the program and excellent understanding of the situation”.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Key findings

In WA we had low uptake of the program. It is believed that this is due to a combination of factors, however overall only a small amount of fires impacted farm businesses to a significant level. In W.A. most of the major fires were contained to national parks, with minimal damage to surrounding farms. In addition, the timing of fires in the Katanning area that impacted farms coincided with

seeding and COVID-19. Producers seemed to “just get on with it”, or perhaps were in shock and focused on the job at hand rather than utilising offered help.

The business that took up the program has found it highly beneficial and is wanting to continue planning into the future (see feedback form in Appendix 5).

Now that we have an example, or “case study” to use to show what the program is designed to do, it is anticipated that any future uptake would be increased.

5.2 Benefits to industry

The project ensured that support was available to all impacted businesses in WA-this was an excellent opportunity, particularly as stock numbers in Western Australia have been diminishing in recent years and producers may not realise they need assistance. There is also a ‘feel good’ aspect for those affected by fires in WA, to know that despite attention focusing on the eastern states’ fires, there is recognition of local hardship, and a program in place to assist producers to get back on their feet.

6. Future research and recommendations

It is recommended that the boundaries of this project are extended to other natural disasters including drought. Much of the southern Wheatbelt has endured three extremely poor seasons, which in context of our environment (Mediterranean) could be classed as drought. Livestock production is diminishing as a result and system changes are required to manage the situation. Helping producers to recognise needed changes through this project would be greatly beneficial.

7. Appendices

7.1 Appendix 1: Murray Action plan session 1

Producer Name:

Consultant Name: Edward Riggall

Date: 10/3/20

	Issue or opportunity identified	Priority	Farm Management action proposed	Time frame	Information or support required	Outcome	Follow-up action required
Short term Actions	Loss of 2 kilometres of external fences	High	Organise fencing plan and secure materials.	2weeks	Review previous plan and see if it can be improved with regard to access to farm. Change gateways to safer locations	Secured farm	Call suppliers, review previous gate locations and potential new ones
	Loss of 3 kilometres of internal fences	high	Organise fencing plan and secure materials.	4weeks	Look at reviewing paddock sizer and existing fence lines. Perhaps refence to soil type.	Secure internal paddocks and improve future productivity	Review soil mapping, review current gate locations ect, might be better locations to aid in movement of stock
Short term Actions	Limited seed set in paddock due to fire		Seed paddock to bulk up	Be ready on rainfall	Agronomist support		
	Erosion of burnt paddocks	high	Fence off paddocks to allow stock to graze unburnt stubble and grasses in neighbouring paddocks.	ASAP	As per internal fence plan		

	Issue or opportunity identified	Priority	Farm Management action proposed	Time frame	Information or support required	Outcome	Follow-up action required
Medium term Actions	Reduced stocking capacity due to less summer grazing available		Review current stocking capacity and actions to take. Review which stock to sell, agist off farm , retain more feed or purchase more feed	4 weeks	Current livestock market reports, discuss with livestock consultant plan for the year	50 tonnes extra barley retained.	Review summer stocking rate pending break of season
	Erosion of burnt paddocks	high	Fence off paddocks to allow stock to graze unburnt stubble and grasses in neighbouring paddocks.	Erosion of burnt paddocks	Contact agronomist for best mix and research	Fence off paddocks to allow stock to graze unburnt stubble and grasses in neighbouring paddocks.	Purchase equipment, book meeting with agronomist.

	Issue or opportunity identified	Priority	Farm Management action proposed	Time frame	Information or support required	Outcome	Follow-up action required
Medium term Actions	Review businesses exposure to this happening again. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check current fire procedures to limit exposure to more extensive fires • Businesses capacity to handle more extensive losses from natural disaster. How much Cash or equity is required 	medium	Full budget, benchmark and review of liquidatable assets of the business.	1 year	Review with consultant and bank.	Family meeting to discuss situation	Book meeting with consultant and bank

	Issue or opportunity identified	Priority	Farm Management action proposed	Time frame	Information or support required	Outcome	Follow-up action required
Long term Actions	Remnant veg burnt, gully burnt.	low	Replant trees and bush	2 years	Number and types of trees and bush best suited gully. Contact local land care organisation	Put together a plan over the year	Contact Wagin Land care

7.2 Appendix 2: Murray Action plan session 2

15/5/2020

	Issue or opportunity identified	Priority	Farm Management action proposed	Time frame	Information or support required	Outcome	Follow-up action required
Short term Actions	Preparing sheep for lambing on limited feed due to reduced accessible paddocks	1	Review ration	immediate	Utilise LifeTime Ewe Management feed charts	Optimise lambing and improve numbers out of situation	Condition score mid-June to assess progress
	Confinement feeding	2	Develop interim confinement feeding system	Immediate	Utilise online tools and knowledge to create confinement feeding system	Paddocks deferred for lambing	Select paddock and implement
Short term	Animal health	3	due to short pastures, sheep more vulnerable to parasites.	immediate	Egg test	Check and treat	review
Medium term	Manage feed and stocking rate for season- depending on season break	1	Strategies for season	2 months	Plan strategies for season	Written exit strategy to manage season	Fill out form
Long term	Extend the seasonal management plan into a multi-year plan	2	Take time to think about longer term plan	12 months	Continued discussion in business	Fully developed plan	Check plan in 12 months

7.3 Appendix 3: Murray Action plan session 3

Date: 25/07/2020

	Issue or opportunity identified	Priority	Farm Management action proposed	Time frame	Information or support required	Outcome	Follow-up action required
Long term Actions	Better integration of crop and livestock. – look at opportunities to optimise both aspects of the business utilising different crops, harvesting and seeding technologies.	1	Research crop combinations, Chaff carts and seeding cereals for grazing. Investigate what other opportunities are available to enhance both aspects of the business.	12 months +	Map out current plan and why. Look at pros and cons of current cropping system. Discuss plan with agronomist, nutritionist and consultant	Develop plan and advantages that come from it, which can quantify the Why.	Review plan in 12 months.

7.4 Appendix 4: Murray feedback form

What change/s have you made?	Fencing has been completed. paddocks have been changed from original design to match soil types. Burnt paddocks were sown down early to ensure ground cover and feed for livestock. Internal fencing installed early to limit erosion of burnt paddocks. Extra feed purchased and stock agisted to reduce stocking rate.
Have you noticed a positive change in your business since completing the Back to Business program?	Yes

Why did you decide not to implement the action plan?	-
Was the delivery of your Back to Business sessions impacted by COVID-19?	No
How was delivery of your Back to Business sessions facilitated?	In person;Web meeting (zoom, gotomeeting, WebEx etc.);
Did you feel as though the program delivery was successful via this method?	Yes
Would you recommend the Back to Business program to other producers affected by natural disaster?	Yes
Do you have any suggestions on how to improve the Back to Business program?	-
Any other comments about your experience in the Back to Business program?	it was a tough time, great to have flexibility in the program and excellent understanding of situation
Do you consent to MLA contacting you in regards to:	Informing me of future events and activities;
Would you like more information on any of the following MLA programs/workshops:	Producer Demonstration Sites; BredWell FedWell Sheep;
Are you an MLA member?	Yes
First Name	
Last Name	
Email Address	
Phone number	
Name of consultant/s used during Back to Business sessions	Edward Riggall
How did you find out about the Back to Business program?	Social media (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn)
Previous to the back to business program, how often did you utilise a farm consultant/advisor?	Yearly
After completing the Back to Business program, how likely are you to continue to utilise consultants/advisors in your business?	Very likely
What type of consulting assistance were you provided with?	Financial Planning; Nutrition (feeding programs);Whole farm planning;

Is this different from the type/s of assistance originally requested?	No
Why did the type/s of assistance change?	-
The speed at which your request to join the Back to Business program was responded to	8
The level of support you received as part of the Back to Business program	9
The consultant/s you were assigned to work with as part of the Back to Business program	9
Your overall satisfaction with the Back to Business program	10
The advice you received as part of Back to Business was valuable for your business	8
The three sessions all provided appropriate advice for your situation	8
Your knowledge of recovery from natural disasters has improved as part of the Back to Business program	8
The back to business program has increased your confidence in making change on-farm	9
Rate the overall level of support received as part of Back to Business	10
Have you implemented the action plan on farm that was developed during the Back to Business sessions?	Yes