



# final report

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## Pasture Updates Western Australia

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## **Abstract**

Pasture Updates Western Australia was presented by Meat and Livestock Australia with Evergreen Farming from 2013-2015 across the WA agricultural regions. With a great deal of information available to farming businesses in the pastures and livestock space, Pasture Updates WA was instrumental in bringing this information out to the regions and linking researchers and their research, with the farmers – the end users.

At the beginning of the project, the Evergreen Farming committee, consisting of producers from across the WA agricultural zones, created a plan to take the events to regions where there was interest in pastures and livestock either now, or in the recent past. It was also identified by this group that a significant number of 'influencers' were located in or near Perth, such as consultants, students and researchers, so some of the events were targeted at this audience in an effort to broaden the reach of the information. Subsequently, the locations for the nine events over the three years were planned and grower groups in those regions contacted to be made aware that the event would be brought to their region in the particular year.

Over the course of the project, these events were conducted with great success and resulted in pastures research getting into farmers hands and minds, where they could be shared and moulded to individual needs by the farmers themselves.

## Executive Summary

The WA Pasture Updates were held across Western Australia in an effort to

- 1) Raise the awareness of research output from MLA and partner projects, 'national' pasture investments that are relevant regionally and locally, as well as regional R&D.
- 2) Communicate the opportunities that may be provided with improved pasture technologies, and signpost participants to additional information and associated tools.
- 3) Showcase producers who have made change on-farm (via visit or speaker)
- 4) Based on MLA's existing M&E processes, assess: shifts in knowledge, skills and confidence and where appropriate, practice change, participant's reflections on direction and research needs around the topics presented

This was achieved by taking the nine WA Pasture Updates events to eight different locations over the three years, and presenting programmes at each location that were specifically tailored to the region and interests of producers in those areas. Given Evergreen Farming is a state-wide grower group with a focus on pastures and livestock systems, they were the ideal vehicle to ascertain the needs as they were able to use their broad network of members throughout the state. In addition to this network, grower groups in each region were liaised with to ensure the programmes were locally and seasonally relevant and would be held at suitable times and locations to work in with the target audiences.

Programmes were tailored specifically for each location. Some topic titles were relevant across all regions, but were adapted according to the region, for example "New Pasture Species". MLA tools were also featured at each location with an emphasis on the tools that would be of most benefit to those attending. Local and visiting farmers were used on every programme, as farmers love to hear from other farmers. On each programme, a Farmer Panel was featured, which gave an informal snapshot of local, season specific experiences and knowledge. In addition, each programme also featured a farmer from another region sharing their knowledge. These farmers were generally early adopters of MLA research activities, such as summer sowing.

A total of 479 people attended the Pasture Updates over the three years, with the vast majority of them farmers. Although farmers were the main target audience, it was important to also attract consultants, resellers and researchers to the events, to add depth and value to the days, as it is at events such as these that networks are formed and/or broadened, giving opportunity for new ideas to be shared and further knowledge built through more informal means at breaks during the days. Consultants were especially important, as in WA many are very informed in grains research, but less so in pastures, so it was identified that we must try and attract their attendance as well, given that if every consultant has at least 15 clients they have the opportunity to influence many farmers.

All that attended any of the WA Pasture Update events were provided with a booklet with many of the presentations (or summaries of) so that they would have a document to refer to during the day, as well as something to take home to read after the event, and to show to others in their business. These booklets also provided an opportunity to showcase further pastures information that could be pursued by farmers after the event, as well as contact information for some of the providers on the day. This ensured longevity of the information

provided on the day having it all in one place to take home, and the option for note taking in the one booklet.

At the beginning of the WA Pasture Updates, Evergreen Farming decided to work towards building a culture, an expectation, of Pasture Updates - to have them seen to be the event to go to, to find out the latest and greatest in pasture. With Crop Updates seen as such an event for grain growers in WA, it was seen as the ideal opportunity to create a similar event for livestock producers/grass growers. Numbers attending at most events reflected the thirst for information by this sector and Evergreen Farming believes that Pasture Updates have become an event that most farmers interested in pastures, will eagerly anticipate in the future and look for, for up to date, relevant research information.

## Table of Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Background.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Projective objectives .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Methodology .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Discussion.....</b>	<b>7</b>
	4.1 Practical implications for industry.....	7
	4.2 Project objectives summary.....	7
<b>5</b>	<b>Conclusions/recommendations .....</b>	<b>12</b>
	5.1 Future WA Pasture Updates.....	12

# 1 Background

WA Pasture Updates was undertaken in an effort to build awareness and widely communicate pasture research to producers and provide opportunity for knowledge sharing between researchers, producers and related parties through events.

## 2 Projective objectives

- 2.1 Coordinated the development and implementation of 3 pasture technical updates per annum in WA. Locations are to be varied across the State providing broad coverage enabling access by as many producers as possible.
- 2.2 150 producers to have participated at the Pasture Updates each year(goal over 3 years of 450 producers)
- 2.3 Presented MLA research output at each of the Updates related to increasing pasture production and converting pasture into product.
- 2.4 Partner with regional producer networks and other organisations to support the development and delivery of the updates.
- 2.5 Annual reporting of monitoring and evaluation results that demonstrate shifts in knowledge, skills and confidence and where appropriate, practice change and participant's reflections on direction and research needs around the topics presented.

## 3 Methodology

The MLA WA Pasture Updates were hosted by Evergreen Farming, a statewide grower group with a focus on livestock systems, and a vision for “Healthy farming landscapes through profitable and robust pasture systems”. Having Evergreen Farming host the events, provided a statewide network of growers and industry, along with strong linkages with localised regional grower groups.

With the project being for a period of three years, the Evergreen Farming committee were able to plan the locations for the nine events, in order to ensure wide geographical coverage, so that the WA Pasture Updates was offered to all relevant regions across the life of the project. Regional grower groups were also consulted so that any event in their area fitted into their plans, or so they were aware that one of the events would be held in their area, so they could work that in to their yearly calendars.

Topics and speakers for each event were identified specifically for the region being visited and producers’ local issues, between the Evergreen Farming committee, the events manager and local grower groups. This was done early in the year that the event was being held in that location. This took into account any seasonal issues, regional priorities and general interest to ensure a locally relevant and interesting programme that producers would be eager to hear. Agribusiness personnel were also consulted to offer any input on issues they felt were of importance to the producers in that region.

The format of each event was developed with collaboration between local groups and Evergreen Farming and the events manager. Advice was taken from local groups, as to

whether conference style or field day (or a combination of both) was the most appropriate for each location, as they knew what was lacking in their area, and/or what was being sought. They also advised as to the most suitable venue and catering in their area.

Booklets were provided at each event, incorporating presentations or summaries from those presenters who were able to provide them prior to the event. These resources allowed note taking by attendees as well and the opportunity to have papers that could be taken home and revisited at a later date.

Evaluations were conducted at each event, in conjunction with the Making More from Sheep and More Beef from Pastures programmes. These varied between written forms and electronic clickers. These evaluations enabled feedback to be sought from participants at the end of each event.

Over the three years of the project, modifications were made to the methodology based on feedback received from each event and the seasonal needs of the producers in the regions visited. Having Evergreen Farming coordinate all events across WA's agricultural region enabled lessons to be learnt from each event and changes made to continually improve each programme and the execution. Topics and speakers were also able to be shared across regions, providing many opportunities for cross over in the quest to provide information and increase the knowledge and sharing for producers through the WA Pasture Updates.

## **4 Discussion**

### **4.1 Practical implications for industry**

Pasture Updates have become a feature on many livestock producers calendars and are seen as an independent, credible source of up to date information on pastures and livestock systems and an event that attracts the producers committed to improving their livestock systems businesses. Most of the events were held in regions with higher numbers of stock, and where events were held with less emphasis on stock, the numbers were lower. If livestock systems are going to continue to be viewed as an important part of the agricultural industry in WA, Pasture Updates must continue to be offered to producers through the regions in order for them to stay up to date on research available to improve productivity and profitability in livestock, therefore pastures.

Two of the events were held in the metropolitan area, in order to cater for the adviser network, along with making the event accessible to other researchers and students, most of whom would not travel to the regions to attend such an event. It was decided in the third year that the attendance rates in the past two years did not warrant targeting this demographic again, so a third was not held. That final year, though, one was held at Gingin (1 hr north of Perth) and this attracted a number of students from Curtin University and Murdoch University.

### **4.2 Project objectives summary**

4.2.1 Coordinated the development and implementation of 3 pasture technical updates per annum in WA. Locations are to be varied across the State providing broad coverage enabling access by as many producers as possible.

Nine (9) Pasture Updates were held across WA over the life of the project. Locations were set at the beginning of the project, based on advice by Evergreen Farming committee as to the regions of most interest in pastures and livestock systems. Locations were:

- Dongara
- Moora
- Kojonup
- Wickiepin
- Esperance
- Gingin
- Perth x 2
- Mt Barker

4.2.2 150 producers to have participated at the Pasture Updates each year (goal over 3 years of 450 producers)

A total of 479 people attended Pasture Updates over the three years, with 291 (61%) of respondents to the evaluations across all days, being producers. The number of producers in attendance across all events was pleasing, as WA struggles to attract producers to attend events given the vast geographical spread of farms and farmers. There are also significant clashing farming activities for mixed farmers in August due to cropping activities such as spraying. This cannot be avoided as is an issue throughout the year in mixed farming areas given the many activities requiring mixed farmers' attention, and many of these activities are very heavily dependent on daily conditions such as wind and rain. August remains the better time of year for such events though, as there are no other times that are relatively clear of other events and suitable for visiting pastures in the paddock.

Crucial to the adoption of new technologies, is the support and awareness of the consultant network in WA as they have a great deal of influence over producers and their decision making processes. Therefore, if key advisers are present at any of the events, we view that as representative of at least ten producers who rely on that person for up to date pastures and management information.

4.2.3 Presented MLA research output at each of the Updates related to increasing pasture production and converting pasture into product

At each Pasture Update event, various pieces of MLA research were featured, tailored to suit the audience in each location. These varied from choosing the right pasture species for the right location and managing them in a sustainable, productive manner (EverGraze research) to building knowledge in areas such as rhizobia in legume pastures.

4.2.4 Partner with regional producer networks and other organisations to support the development and delivery of the updates.

Each programme was developed with the Evergreen Farming committee members, reaching from Binu to Borden to Esperance, including both sheep and cattle producers. In addition to this input, local grower groups of each region identified for an event, were liaised with to ensure the topics were locally relevant and of interest to producers in that area. In many cases, they were also asked to supply the producers for the Farmer Panel to give a wide snapshot of pastures and livestock system operations in their region. In the lead up to all



events, these groups were also used to advertise and promote the events through their member channels.

Local groups were also used to advise as to whether to have paddock walks, or just conference style days in their area. This was invaluable, as they had direct knowledge as to what had been held over the past few years, therefore, information on what would be most appropriate. In most cases, conference style events were preferred, as groups often held paddock walks and field days as part of their trials, whereas they did not have many pasture focussed conference sessions where research detail could be visually presented.

Chairs from local groups were also utilised to provide a local 'flavour', along with some industry specialists to help provide a rounded day where the audience were introduced to many of the people in the room who could add value to their experiences on the day.

Grower groups collaborated with were:

- Northern Agri Group
- Mingenew Irwin Group
- West Midlands Group
- Moora Miling Pasture Improvement Group
- Facey Group
- Southern DIRT
- ASHEEP
- Manjimup Pasture Group

In addition to grower groups, other organisations were collaborated with in various way. CSIRO provided a venue for one of the Perth events; DAFWA provided speakers, support and distribution network; Universities distributed programmes and brought students to some events; agribusiness supported by providing additional information at each event i.e. seed companies, local resellers

4.2.5 Annual reporting of monitoring and evaluation results that demonstrate shifts in knowledge, skills and confidence and where appropriate, practice change and participant's reflections on direction and research needs around the topics presented.

Reports were provided in a timely manner at each milestone, outlining activities over the designated period, along with copies of programmes provided specific topics and speakers for each event.

#### Attendance

Attendee numbers were collected on registration, giving the total number of people present. Evaluation forms were provided to all in attendance, providing more in depth information and feedback, such as the percentage of producers/non-producers and area farmed.

Location	Producers %	Non-producers %	Area represented (ha's)	Total
Dongara	75	25	17630	35
Mt Barker	60	40	10464	55
Perth 2013	50.5	49.5	8181	44
Moora	86	14	54695	56
Kojonup	84	16	64996	103
Perth 2014	67	33	9950	39
Wickepin	62	38	22155	36
Esperance	64	36	27105	47
Gingin	37	63	3196	64
TOTAL			218,372	479

Kojonup was by far the most attended event, with weather conditions on the day favourable (ie windy so not a good spraying day) and a more reliable season being experienced, therefore more considerations of improving pastures due to healthier budgets and good rainfall in the region. There had also not been a specific pastures conference style event held locally for a number of years.

Dongara and Wickepin were the less well attended of the nine events. Both of these locations reside in areas that have a higher percentage of cropping area, although Wickepin more so than Dongara. Anecdotal feedback on the lower attendance numbers indicated that 1) Dongara event was too close to Dowerin Machinery Field Days (2 weeks away) so people could only spare time to do one or the other, and the area had received recent rains meaning they needed to attend to their crops 2) Wickepin had had recent rain so weeds in crops were an issue and the day of the event had the best spraying conditions experienced in the region since the rains. In response to this feedback, the following year the Pasture Updates series was moved forward to provide greater distance from dates of Dowerin Field Days. Rain and spraying conditions were felt to be something that was not able to be planned around.

Both Perth events and Gingin attracted a number of Agribusiness students from Curtin University and nearly all filled in evaluation sheets, therefore the percentage of producer respondents at these three events were lower. These three events were also targeted at the wider industry group (students and advisers) so goals were achieved in this area.

### Presentations

Overall, feedback reinforced farmers desire to hear from other farmers. At every event, at least one farmer presentation rated in the top five presentations. It is very difficult to get farmers to present in front of larger groups, especially farmers that have not been used for presentations in the past, so those that took time to prepare and present are to be congratulated for taking time out from their core business to share their knowledge and experience with others. "Using good pastures to boost productivity and drive down the cost of production" was one such farmer presentation that proved highly valuable at the Mt Barker event and "Pastures – how I make them fit into my whole system" at Wickepin and "Matching animal systems to pasture systems" at Gingin. All these presentations ranked first in content

in evaluations ( and two out of the three in relevance), and were presented by farmers from that region. The Farmers' Panels were also popular and a good way to get farmers in front of the audience talking about their systems and how they were managing the season.

Of the non-farmer presentations, across the board, those presenting on pasture varieties for that region were by far the stand out. This included legumes in Kojonup, serradellas in Gingin and panic in Perth.

The less well received presentations were varied and responses were sometimes jaded by presentation styles resulting in the content being overshadowed by delivery. In general, attendees gave feedback indicating that they did not value presentations that did not give them a clear direction on how information could be used in their business, or if they felt the information was not objective or perceived as a 'sales pitch'.

### Evaluations

The first year, written evaluation sheets were used and only a limited number were filled in. So, the following year, electronic clickers were used to ask strategic questions at the beginning and end of the day, to measure an increase in knowledge. Written forms were also used at the conclusion of the day, but only to gather base information. The third year, the clickers were not able to be accessed so only written forms were used.

At any event, it is difficult to get people to fill in evaluation forms at the end of the day. Some leave early due to commitments, so don't fill one in, and others rush off at the end of the event and not take the time to offer feedback. However, the evaluation forms used were able to supply us with valuable feedback each year, which helped us form the following year's events.

Anecdotal feedback played a large part in planning for following events, as people were very happy to offer verbal feedback during and after the event. Feedback was sought in this way, subtly, by Evergreen Farming committee members and personnel from the local grower groups.

### General feedback

- Across all events, the vast majority heard of the events via Evergreen Farming communications tools and word of mouth.
- All but one event was conducted as a conference style event. One was presented as a combination of field day and conference format.
- Informal drinks at the end of the day was rated highly as a good chance to continue to network, discuss the days topics and follow up with speakers.
- Across the nine events, 20% rated the overall content of the event they attended 'Excellent'; 70% found it 'Very Good' and 10% found it 'Good'. There were no attendees who rated the event they attended 'Fair' or 'Poor'.
- Across nine events, 94% of evaluation respondents to whom the question was relevant, noted they would make changes to their operation, whilst 6% said they would not. There were wide and varied responses as to what changes they would be making, from nutrition, to new species, to management.

### Suggested new research

Some individuals used the evaluation process to offer suggestions of what they thought would be valuable research in the future. These included:

- New varieties that are high in nutrient value and tolerant to various environmental challenges such as frost and salinity
- Grazing – control of barley grass
- Soil biology work
- Disease resistant legume pasture varieties
- Fertilisers for sub tropical pastures
- Bridging the autumn/winter feed gap
- Effect of bees on healthy pastures
- Sacrificial grazing of crops – measurement of the \$ value of pastures, not just the reduced yield in crops

## **5 Conclusions/recommendations**

### **5.1 Future WA Pasture Updates**

Three years of successive events has seen Pasture Updates offered across the WA Agricultural zone, making information and networks pertaining to pastures and livestock systems, accessible to a large number of producers. This was a new initiative and has initiated the building of a culture of learning and sharing in pastures between livestock producers. Given the geographical challenges of reaching large numbers of producers, numbers have not been large at all events, however, as more people hear of the value of these events, more people will take the time. This is what has been seen as WA Crop Updates have built over the years.

There are varying reasons for and against having either three events across the regions, or one large central event. This will be discussed at the next Evergreen Farming committee meeting, and visited informally with grower groups. Pasture Update Coordinators and Project Managers will also be consulted to ascertain their views on the most effective way to extend this information in their experience.

All but one of these events was held in the one week each year. This was done to create a 'roadshow' effect for the events, and make it easier for speakers to commit to, especially those travelling from interstate. It was also a more efficient way to advertise the events as the Pasture Updates brand that was 'visiting' the regions across one week. The disadvantage to this, was managing to have state based researchers available all week and travelling around the state and out of the office/lab for that long. This was managed by sharing around topics between some of the researchers to fit in with their schedules.

Pasture Updates could be used in the future to help add value to WALRC, in talking with producers to ascertain their R,D&A issues. WALRC will be holding forums throughout the WALRC region in 2016 so there is opportunity to value add to both these MLA programmes in the future. This is viewed favourably by producers (levy payers) where they can go to one event and learn as well as have input, rather than trying to get to two different events in their area.

Each of the events included, in the background, sourcing of excellent local catering as it is imperative at these days to ensure there is plenty of nourishing food for attendees. This helped build the positive experience, along with an informal 'sundowner' after each event so that attendees could relax at the end of the day and continue networking and sharing of ideas and issues.

Having Evergreen Farming host the events was an effective way to provide a state wide pastures event. The committee and management were able to give an overall view to pastures in WA with a sound understanding of research past, present and future as well as strong networks across WA and interstate, in the pastures and red meat industry. By then utilising a professional event management organisation to conduct the events, agVivo Events, they were then able to give their expertise whilst knowing that the events would be conducted in a highly professional manner.