

Final report

Innovative Sheep and Beef Networks

Project code: P.PSH.1234
Prepared by: Agriculture Victoria
Date published: 4 March 2025

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

This is an MLA Donor Company funded project.

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

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Abstract

The project sought to address a key industry challenge of how to engage and provide tailored services that enable livestock producers to increase business performance and respond effectively to current and future market signals and unexpected events. It also sought to improve the capacity of service providers and expand the service reach of Agriculture Victoria and Meat and Livestock Australia (MLA). A range of technologies were trialled and tailored to meet differing producer needs (e.g. older and recent entrants, difficult to reach producers). Workshops, tours, road shows, e-learning, case-studies and group activities were used to motivate and guide producers to implement technologies as part of a learning journey. An additional 2,778 producers and ≈4,000 network members participated in the project. Relationships and capability development increased amongst livestock consultants, livestock agents, transporters, pregnancy scanners and shearers and helped to increase further producer engagement. Extension service provider professional development training and performance monitoring systems and associated tools and guidelines were also developed. Recommendations have been developed to continue to improve and tailor services for the Victorian red meat industry, build on the collaboration with MLA for producers to use existing and new measurement tools, and work on continued professional development and mentoring for extension and broader service delivery providers.

Executive summary

Background

Victoria is Australia's largest sheep meat producer (24% of the national flock) and third largest beef producer (10% of the national herd). The Victorian BestWool/BestLamb (BWBL) and BetterBeef (BB) Networks are unique extension networks nationally and co-investment from the Victorian Government, Australian Wool Innovation (AWI) and Meat and Livestock Australia (MLA) is critical to enabling livestock producer engagement.

The Networks have been going for 25 years, meet on a regular basis and are designed around adult learning principles which includes the groups taking ownership of identifying the knowledge and skills that will have the greatest impact on productivity. The existing networks create an environment designed to support adoption over time.

The project (conducted from May 2021 to December 2024) sought to extend and tailor services to meet the diverse needs of the existing BWBL and BB network and broader Victorian livestock producers. The project supported increased business performance and preparedness to address future challenges*. This was done using a range of innovative and traditional approaches to increase producer knowledge and improve skills and capacity to improve farm performance. Producers were supported to engage in a dynamic learning journey starting from wherever they wanted to start (introductory measurements, more intermediate products or full business analysis) and service providers were trained and supported to assist producers on the journey.

A key target audience was to continue the learning journey for the existing 65 BWBL and BB groups (a mixed age and skill cohort with some older farmers with relatively low computer skills) and other existing producer groups†. In addition, strong efforts were made to extend services to producers with differing needs, in particular young entrants (often with high levels of debt and strong computer skills), producers who have been typically hard to reach (through working with service providing agents), geographically dispersed producers with shared common interests and across differing production systems-based producers.

The lack of 'measurement and monitoring to manage' approach on farm was identified as a significant barrier to best practice adoption by livestock producers. A focus of this project was to motivate and support changes in farm management practice through a measure to manage approach.

The project's findings were used to improve and tailor services available to the Victorian red meat industry, build on the collaboration with MLA for producers to use existing and new measurement tools, and work on continued professional development and mentoring for extension and broader service delivery providers.

* Including enhanced biosecurity, emergency response preparedness, animal welfare, environmental protection, building resilience to climate change and meeting supply chain requirements.

† Landcare, Gippsland Ag Group Farmers, Perennial Pasture Systems and Southern Farming Systems.

Outcomes and Objectives

The project sought to achieve the following outcomes and objectives for improved livestock industry performance and preparedness.

Outcome 1: Innovative Producer Network

A more innovative and coordinated Victorian sheep and beef network that is managing the delivery of highly valued products and services.

Objectives

Victorian sheep and beef producer networks are:

- 1.1. Expanding in their reach by 2000 producers (through greater membership and adding value to independent producer networks) through designing innovative approaches and delivery models for facilitating practice change
- 1.2. Define the diverse needs and motivations of Victorian farmers and tailor services in response to these identified segments
- 1.3. Equipping R&D providers, government & industry decision makers with intelligence & knowledge that increases their understanding of the Victorian livestock sector's needs.

Outcome 1: Comments

This outcome was met through expanding engagement and the networks' reach of an additional 2,778 producers[‡] and ≈4,000 network members[§], identifying key demographic groups for tailored service delivery and providing strategic industry direction.

Outcome 2: Producer Adoption:

Producers are measuring, monitoring and managing key profit drivers and risks, and implementing the technologies and management practices required to improve their business performance

Objectives

- 2.1 Producers are measuring, monitoring and managing key profit drivers and risks, and implementing the technologies and management practices required to improve their business performance
- 2.2 Producers are accessing best practice technology and management innovations to make appropriate changes within their businesses
- 2.3 Producers are improving their understanding and responsiveness to market signals, where they exist

Outcome 2: Comments

This outcome was largely met^{**}. A range of technologies were trialled, tailored to meeting the needs of producers at their relevant stage of measuring and monitoring. Technologies ranged from simple measurement and record keeping to more complex financial benchmarking. Workshops, tours, road shows, e-learning, case-studies and group activities were used to guide producers through measurement, monitoring and implementation of technologies.

Outcome 3: Service Provider Development

Service providers to the red meat industry are motivating and supporting producers to implement the technologies and management practices required to improve their business performance.

Specifically, service providers are:

Objectives

- 3.1 Improving their own capability (skills and knowledge pertaining to latest R&D outcomes, business performance and livestock production benchmarks)

[‡] This exceeded the target of an additional 2,000 producers.

[§] From ≈3,500 to ≈7,500.

^{**} Supply chain co-ordinators were not able to be put in place due to COVID-19.

3.2 Building their capacity to service the Victorian livestock industries

3.3 Better understanding the competencies of the clients and groups that they service and using this to support and motivate their clients through a service offer that is tailored to their needs.

Outcome 3: Comments

This outcome was met by working directly with livestock agents, pregnancy scanners, shearers, livestock transporters. These service deliverers collectively reach many non-users of Agriculture Victoria services. Significant work was also conducted for extension service providers through developing professional development training and performance monitoring systems, a tool to track changes in knowledge, attitudes, skills and aspirations (KASA), coordinator guidelines and a tools and resources catalogue.

Methodology

The project methodology was based on a Theory of Change, with seven activity areas aligned to one or more of the three medium term outcome areas. The main activity areas were:

- Identifying producer engagement preferences, motivations, sector issues and review of the existing Network service offer.
- Updating membership processes, coordinator communications, data sharing and developing more uniform request for tender processes.
- Implementation of innovative communications, campaigns and coordinated membership drives.
- Development of innovative and tailored services to meet producer needs.
- Collection of results and provision of feedback to enable developers to have continuous improvement.
- Evaluation, auditing, piloting and promotion of tools and programs to producers.
- Professional development, training and performance monitoring.

The project methodology adapted throughout the project and remained cognisant of and responsive to producer needs, including changing circumstances and operating context (including COVID-19 and natural disaster emergencies), to ensure success.

Results/key findings

The project demonstrated positive results and contribution to project outcomes and objectives. The average recommended rating across all the activities and events was 98.7%. The average satisfaction rating was 8.9 out of 10. The average pre workshop knowledge was 4.6/10 which increased to post knowledge of 7.2/10.

Producer and Service Provider Engagement

Total number of producers engaged	5485
Total number of service providers	1485
Total number of activities delivered	334

Key impacts from the independent impact evaluation included

- 66% of producers involved have implemented and seen positive changes in their farm business.

- 63% of producers involved have an increased understanding of production targets and are now managing their farm to achieve them.
- 58% of producers involved agree they have an increased understanding of the key profit drivers and risk through benchmarking and are now managing their farm to achieve them.
- 57% of producers involved agree that their understanding of markets to maximise returns has increased.
- Participating producers noted that the effectiveness of their coordinator to provide support to their local group had increased.

Outcome 1: Innovative Producer Network: the project has strengthened and expanded the existing BWBL and BB Network, supported and strengthened collaboration between a broader network of existing producer and industry led groups, and has resulted in a more strategic and coordinated approach and quality of services offered to Victorian livestock producers, which are tailored to different producer segments.

Outcome 2: Producer Adoption: Piloting of new models and development of a pathway based on producer capacity and interests (simple introductory measurement, intermediate and high-level full business analysis) resulted in increased measuring, monitoring and management of key profit drivers and risks, and adoption of the technologies and practices that improve business performance.

Outcome 3: Service Provider Development: Capability development of extension service providers, within and beyond the BWBL and BB networks was provided through a range of activities^{††}. Substantial progress was also made in developing relationships and building capability of other service providers (pregnancy scanners, livestock agents, shearers and livestock transporters). The project also highlighted substantial challenges regarding engagement of Victorian livestock processors and their use of market specification data/tools.

Benefits to industry

Strengthening existing BWBL and BB network, and broadening engagement across the Victorian livestock industry and supply chain^{**} is a legacy of the project that will continue to benefit the industry. Through links and relationships that have been fostered, there is greater collaboration and an increased profile and presence of MLA. Continued Government investment in the networks relies heavily on co-investment from industry.

The project has brought about more efficient and coordinated services to the livestock industry and increased intelligence used to inform policy and program design on a variety of issues of importance to the industry. Benefits to the Victorian livestock industry include:

- Improved knowledge and decision-making for existing and new producers.
- Multiple benefits to producers from practice change.

^{††} These included: Mentoring for new service providers to develop skills in delivering MLA products; Training in livestock farm monitor delivery; Networking opportunities through annual conferences and farm tours; Work in Service Provider Professional Development, Training and Performance Monitoring System; Guidelines for group coordinators to help them understand client needs; Development and piloting of a KASA tracker; Tools and resources catalogue re tools producers could tap into and where it might be beneficial.

^{**}Meat processors, livestock transporters, saleyard operators, agents' association, Landcare networks, and other farmer networks.

- Developed system for tracking producers' knowledge and skill development and assisting groups to plan programs which will have the greatest impact on producer productivity.
- Economic benefits to industry.
- Improved producer well-being.
- Improved connections, knowledge sharing and development with private service providers.
- Greater connections with processors.

Future research and recommendations

Key recommendations for the Victorian red meat industry are to continue to build on the existing networks and engagement models within Victoria, in collaboration with MLA, using existing and new tools and processes available and continuing investment in innovative delivery methods to meet the changing needs of livestock producers. There is also a continued need for targeted professional development programs for a range of service providers, including group coordinators and facilitators. Main recommendations are:

1. Continued investment in the BWBL and BB networks to build on the tools and processes available and range of innovative delivery methods that meet the changing needs of beef and sheep producers. In particular:
 - Implement the strategies outlined in the Network Blueprint (Hickey and Trompf, 2025) and piloted in the Innovative Network project to engage the next tier of producers by partnering with livestock agents.
 - Implement Service Provider Professional Development, Training and Performance Monitoring System (Howard, 2024 a, b).
 - Target services for different market segments, including new red meat producers, part-time farmers and young producers.
 - Incorporate the newly developed KASA tracker to support knowledge and skill development.
 - Ensure products, tools and resources are developed into webpages to make them more discoverable for AI generated responses.
 - Consideration of continuation of some hardcopy communications with Victorian livestock producers, such as SheepNotes.
2. Continued professional development support for broader industry associations.
3. Continue to support stronger connections between producers and processors.

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1. Background

The livestock industry is an important part of Victoria's regional economy. Victoria is Australia's largest sheep meat producer (Karanja, 2024a) and third largest beef producer (Karanja, 2024b). The sheep and wool industry, specialised beef enterprises and the meat processing sector employs over 23,000 people in Victoria and most livestock production is carried out on family owned and managed farms.

Victoria is Australia's largest sheep meat exporter. The gross value of lamb and mutton production in Victoria is approximately \$2.2 billion generating \$1.9 billion in export sales. An additional \$874 million of wool is produced representing around a third of Australia's wool production and generates \$1.5 billion in export sales. Victoria is also the second largest exporter of beef in Australia. The gross value of beef production is estimated at \$2.9 billion annually contributing around 21% of Australia's total beef production and generating \$1.8 billion in export sales

Victorian beef and sheep livestock numbers (Figure 1) total close to 17.5 million head in 2021, comprising approximately 15 million sheep (second largest in Australia) and 2.2 million beef cattle, representing 24% and 10% of the national flock/herd respectively.

There are approximately 18,000 farms engaged in sheep and beef production (includes hobby and lifestyle farms), accounting for the management of around 40% of Victoria's private land. The best estimate of commercial livestock farm numbers is 10,250 farms, made up of 2,500 specialist sheep farms, 5,000 specialist beef farms, 2,100 mixed livestock-cropping and 650 sheep-beef farms (Karanja, 2024a and b).

The Victorian Bestwool/Bestlamb (BWBL) and BetterBeef (BB) Networks are unique extension networks for sheep and beef producers, in what is offered and how they operate, in comparison with the national landscape of extension programs for livestock producers. This uniqueness emanates from the coupling of significant long-term (over 25 years) investment from the Victorian Government and Research and Development Corporations such as Australian Wool Innovation (AWI) and Meat and Livestock Australia (MLA). The networks provide a well-recognised platform for individual producers and groups to gain access to industry research and development, practical on-farm tools, subject matter experts, best practice information and activities that increase skills and knowledge. The networks focus on engaging, motivating, and supporting producers to improve their productivity, business performance, and resilience. Continued MLA investment through these networks offers the most effective approach to engage and reach livestock producers. The Victorian Government continues to support the network but requires continued support and co-investment from industry. A Network Blueprint was developed through this project, with five key themes to support the Victorian sheep and beef industries over the next 10 years (Hickey and Trompf, 2025).

At the commencement of the project (30 June 2021) the sheep and beef networks had a livestock producer membership (farmers actively participating in groups) of 2,707 and an additional associate network membership (more occasional users of services) of 3,612. Engagement activities offered through the BWBL and BB network include producer discussion groups, regional field days, annual conferences, newsletters, phone seminars/webinars, and accredited training programs. The network is underpinned by a skilled and enthusiastic group of coordinators that guide self-directed groups to achieve their goals and simultaneously address the priorities of the network partners.

Given the numbers and diversity of livestock enterprises across Victoria and the associated knowledge base, motivations and dynamic operating environments, the industry problem being addressed by this project is focused on providing tailored services that enable livestock producers to increase their business performance and be able to respond effectively to current and future market signals and build resilience to unexpected events.

This project aimed to trial innovative approaches to engagement across the Victorian industry. Unexpected events during the project included COVID-19 (from 2020), Extensive Floods (2022 and 2023), seasonal drought across much of Southern Australia in 2024 and biosecurity issues including responses to heightened threat of foot and mouth disease, Avian influenza and Japanese Encephalitis. These events provided both opportunities for the project to engage producers with timely information, but also presented significant challenges, including Victorian community lock downs which impacted producer engagement and the project team’s ability to deliver the project.

This project (May 2021 to December 2024) sought to achieve three outcomes to improve livestock industry performance and preparedness:

- Outcome 1: A more innovative and coordinated Victorian sheep and beef network that is managing the delivery of highly valued products and services
- Outcome 2: Producers are measuring, monitoring and managing key profit drivers and risks, and implementing the technologies and management practices to improve business performance
- Outcome 3: Service providers are motivating and supporting producers to implement the technologies and management practices required to improve their business performance.

Project results and learnings will be used for continuous improvement of services to livestock producers.

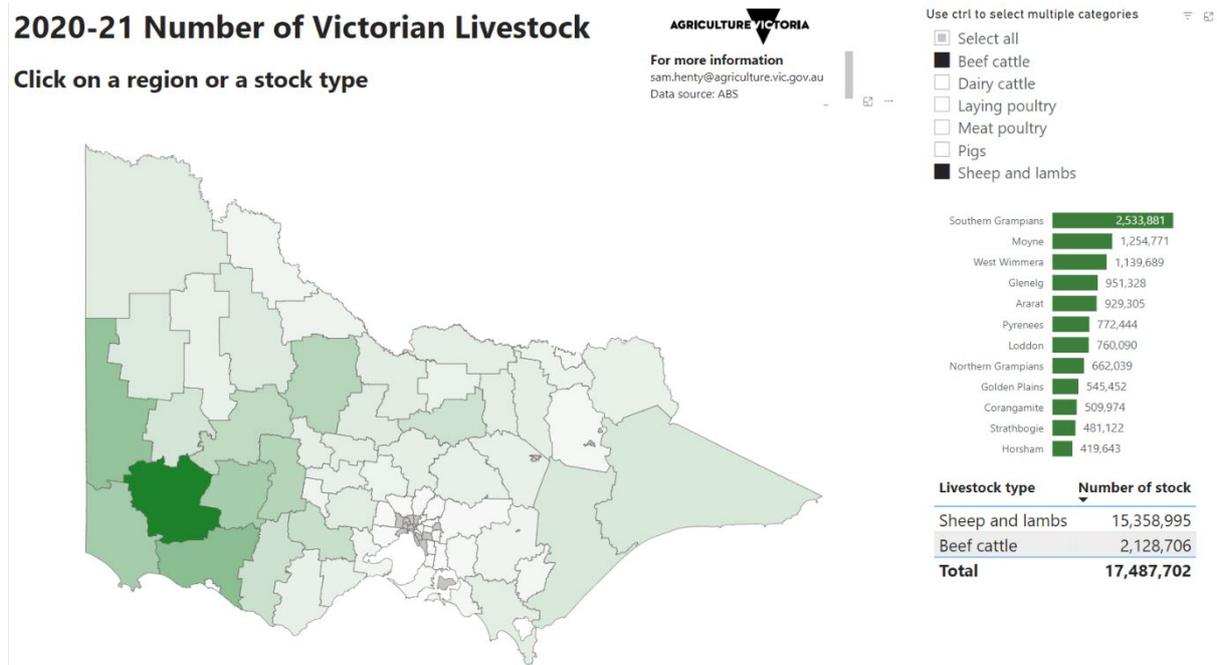


Figure 1. Sheep and beef cattle numbers in Victoria (2020-21).

2. Objectives

2.1 Extent to which objectives were met

The three outcomes and associated objectives, along with assessment of the extent to which they were met is described in Table 1. Outcomes were achieved through activities under each objective, apart from objective 2.3 which was only partly met. Further details are provided in the results section of this report.

Table 1. Extent to which the outcomes and objectives have been met through the Innovative Sheep and Beef Networks project.

Outcomes and objectives	Met or not	Brief comments
Outcome 1: A more innovative and coordinated Victorian sheep and beef network that is managing the delivery of highly valued products and services		
Objective 1.1. Expand reach by 2000 producers (through greater membership and adding value to independent producer networks) through designing innovative approaches and delivery models for facilitating practice change.	Met	Reach expanded beyond target – additional 2,785 producers and ≈4,000 network members because of the project, through a range of innovative approaches.
Objective 1.2. Define the diverse needs and motivations of Victorian farmers and tailor services in response to these identified segments.	Met	Having identified a range of farmer characteristics and attributes that influence adoption, strategies were implemented to cater to these different values, risk tolerance, experience levels and likely appetite for change. Piloting of topic-based groups was successful in responding flexibly to issues that emerged during the project and to engage a new cohort of producers.
Objective 1.3. Equip R&D providers, government and industry decision makers with intelligence and knowledge that increases their understanding of the Victorian livestock sector's needs.	Met	The Blueprint provides strategic direction for the industry in Victoria. State of the Sector reports, with knowledge fed into Southern Australian Livestock Research Council, policy advisors and other decision makers. Campaigns were developed to meet immediate and urgent needs.
Outcome 2: Producers are measuring, monitoring and managing key profit drivers and risks, and implementing the technologies and management practices to improve business performance.		
2.1 Set priority production and financial targets/benchmarks and effectively manage their enterprises to achieve them.	Met	Financial benchmarking completed on an additional 30 farms using Livestock Farm Monitor methods and used for group discussions. Many other activities around 'Measure to Manage' were implemented which resulted in increased awareness, record keeping, benchmarking and improved business management.

2.2 Access best practice technology and management innovations to make appropriate changes within their business.	Met	A range of technologies and innovations were trialled such as Pregnancy scanning for sheep; AgTech focussed tours and workshops; Roadshow; Annual conference; Risk and records on farm workshops.
2.3 Improve producer understanding and responsiveness to market signals, where they exist.	Partly met	'Hitting the grid' workshops were piloted with processors and producers; Farmer groups visited meat processor; showcase of MyFeedBack; Profitable Grazing Systems workshops; Small landholder booklets and elearn. The proposed Supply Chain Coordinators were not in place within meat processors which limited engagement with processors, hence this outcome was only partly achieved.
Outcome 3: Service providers are motivating and supporting producers to implement the technologies and management practices required to improve their business performance		
3.1 Engage in opportunities to improve their capability (skills and knowledge pertaining to latest R&D outcomes, business performance and livestock production benchmarks).	Met	Coordinator conferences, Pregnancy scanning training; Livestock Agents workshop, mentoring for new service providers to develop skills in delivering MLA products, Training in livestock farm monitor delivery; annual conferences.
Objective 3.2. Invest in building their capacity to service the Victorian livestock industries.	Met	Service Provider Professional Development, Training and Performance Monitoring System. Guidelines for group coordinators provide a strong basis for future investment.
Objective 3.3 Better understand the competencies of the clients and groups that they service and use this to support and motivate their clients through a service offer that is tailored to their needs.	Met	Group review and planning training – developed and piloted KASA tracker tool; Guidelines for coordinators to help them understand client / farmer needs; Tools and resources catalogue of tools for producers; Performance monitoring framework.

2.2 Deliverables

Achieving delivery of the 21 contract deliverables allowed the project outcomes and objectives to be met. Milestone reports were provided and accepted by MLA every six months over the life of the project, on the progress of deliverables. Table 2 shows the linkages between the agreed deliverables (head contract) and their linkage to the project's outcomes and objectives.

Table 2. Linkage between deliverables, outcomes and objectives

Deliverable	Outcome	Objective
1. Review existing and/or conduct producer consultation or market research to understand key barriers and drivers of adoption of agricultural practices in Victoria.	1, 2, 3	N/A
2. Design and implement an annual strategic review and planning process for current and new producer groups	2	2.1
3. Design and implement mechanism of engaging groups and individual producers in a range of monitoring and benchmarking activities that allow them to participate (and progress) at a level appropriate to their current skills, knowledge and priorities (e.g. Foundations of Success, Monitor to Manage, Cost of Production, Livestock Farm Monitor, Hitting the Grid, Making Use of Feedback)	2	2.1
4. Design and implement mechanism of engaging groups, associate members and non-members in a range of innovative learning programs and delivery methods (eg. eLearning)	2, 3	2.2, 3.1
5. Expose producers to a range of tools, resources and programs (e.g. MLA, AgVic, EverGraze and SheepCRC) to evaluate their usefulness to their enterprise, increase uptake and/or provide feedback to the developers and curators for continuous improvement	1, 2	1.1, 2.2
6. Detailed method for the engagement of producer groups (BWBL, BBN and processor groups) with supply chain coordinators, to increase their understanding of the value chain and stimulate practice change on farm that will improve compliance to specification and their own profitability (including engagement with ALMTECH)	2	2.3
7. Design and implement mechanism for producers to effectively engage with the Ag technology sector including digital farms and new technologies	2	2.2
8. Establish processes (e.g. technical reference groups, communities of practice, coaching model) to build the capacity of service providers in priority areas, such as business management, linking in with MLA capability building programs such as RIPP, FLC3, and LAU.	3	3.1, 3.2
9. Develop and implement a training and performance monitoring system for group coordinators	3	3.1
10. Develop and pilot a framework for group coordinators to assess and track individual producers within their groups for their knowledge and skills, and practice change	3	3.3
11. Develop and pilot a Graduate Program to build new service provider capability and capacity (involving diverse stakeholders including private service providers, processors, MLA and AgVic)	3	3.2
12. Develop and pilot a monitoring and benchmarking framework with a range of service providers and their groups	3	3.3
13. Develop and pilot a mechanism for Supply Chain Coordinators to engage with their suppliers	2	2.3
14. Develop and pilot a capability building and accreditation process for sheep pregnancy scanners	3	3.2
15. Employ an Innovation Manager to lead the development and delivery of innovative service delivery approaches to an expanded producer network	1	1.1

Deliverable	Outcome	Objective
16. Incorporate expertise in new agricultural technologies to ensure that the new service offer is maximising its use of all relevant novel technologies	2	2.2
17. Develop a suite of innovative delivery and communication models to engage an expanded and diverse range of producers (e.g. specific “campaign issues” to provide a highly visible focus that captures a broader industry audience; a benchmarking framework that engages producers at a range of levels from basic production to full financial analysis and value chain feedback data; producer study tours; learning modules to meet specific priorities; the formation of “specific issue-based” groups with a defined lifespan)	1	1.2
18. Develop a mechanism for identifying and prioritising emerging livestock production and value chain issues, and feeding this intelligence into SALRC, government and industry decision makers	1	1.3
19. Detailed mechanism for engaging in MLA adoption programs (category A, B and C), including identifying opportunities for development of new programs and approaches to suit producer and advisor needs.	1, 3	1.2, 3.2
20. Leverage other MLA and AgVic investments where possible through engagement with MLA R&D managers	1	1.3
21. Deliver a blueprint for industry detailing the development of successful producer network	1	1.1

3. Methodology

3.1 Methodology overview

The project methodology was based on a developed Theory of Change, with seven activity areas of work (shown in green in Figure 2), which contributed to one or more of the three medium term outcome areas via key outputs. The main activity areas were:

- Identifying producer engagement preferences, motivations, sector issues and review of the Network service offer.
- Updating membership processes, coordinator communications, data sharing and developing more uniform request for tender processes.
- Implementation of innovative communications, campaigns and coordinated membership drives.
- Development of innovative and tailored services to meet producer needs.
- Collection of results and provision of feedback to enable developers to have continuous improvement.
- Evaluation, auditing, piloting and promotion of tools and programs to producers.
- Professional development, training and performance monitoring.

Table 3 shows the major activities conducted that were primarily aligned with the three outcome areas and noting that some activities also covered more than one outcome area.

This was a complex and multi-faceted project. Given the need to be responsive to producers' needs, including changing circumstances (particularly COVID-19 lock downs), the methodology and many activities needed to be adapted as the project progressed. It is difficult to comment on the extent to which methods and activities were efficient but overall, the project was assessed as successful, including through the conduct of an independent evaluation (Lannin et al. 2024).

Innovative Sheep and Beef Networks Theory of Change

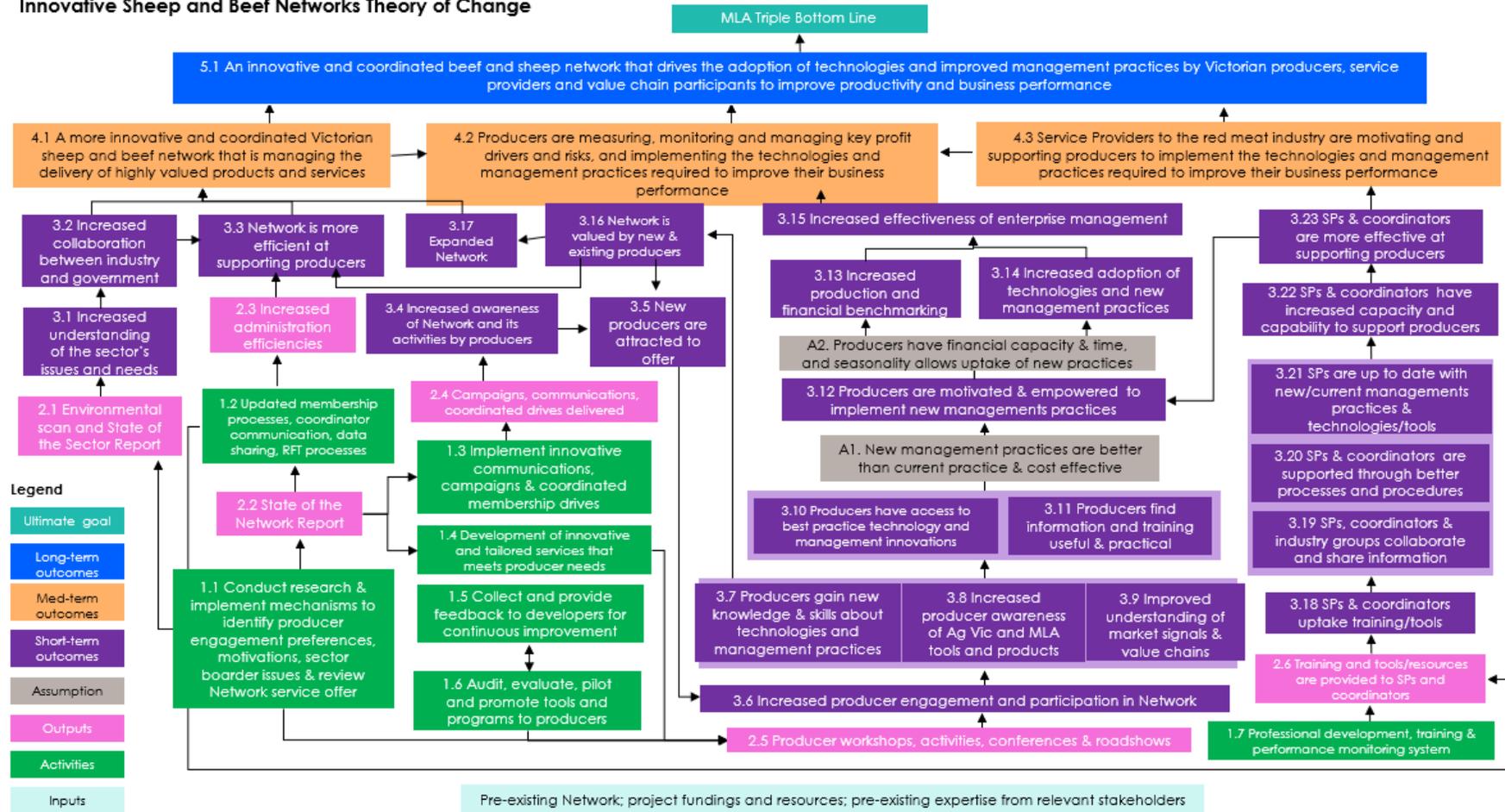


Figure 2. Theory of change developed for Innovative Sheep and Beef Networks project.

Table 3. Summary of methods/activities used across outcome areas in the Innovative Sheep and Beef Networks project.

OUTCOME 1: Innovative Producer Network	OUTCOME 2: Producer Adoption	OUTCOME 3: Service Provider Development
Communication platform development (Sharepoint) Email and WhatsApp Groups Miro for Focus groups	65 groups, with 6 sessions per year per group, covering topics of interest to producers and including additional farm monitor project work	Annual Coordinator 2-day Conference
Membership drives – data sharing	Producer study tours (5)	Pregnancy Scanner workshop
Group review and planning process design	Processor group workshops. Plus webinar on Myfeedback	Livestock agent workshops
Topic based groups- new group model with defined topic, fixed term pilot to attract new producers	Topic/Issues based groups; e.g. worm management, preg scanning, raising the Baa, T-90, fire and flood recovery	Group benchmarking using livestock farm monitor
Reporting to SALRC - State of the Industry Report	Online group	KASA tracker tool to support efficient group performance
State of the networks	Biosecurity farm planning and risk assessment delivered	Performance monitoring framework developed
Understanding Barriers to Adoption	Livestock Farm Monitor project (full farm financial analysis) (30 additional enterprises)	Tools and resources provided – e.g. WhatsApp for groups/coordinators, electronic signatures for contracts, RFT process, Sharepoint site
Network advisory committee	BWBL/BB Conferences	Focus Groups
Producer advisory committee	Newsflash – newsletter (e-news and paper) Sheep notes	Implementation of an annual strategic review and planning process for producer groups, Inc development of guidelines, resources, group facilitation techniques & templates
Communication models including Newsflash distribution; Campaign monitor; Membership drives Issue based campaigns e.g. Foot and Mouth Disease, on farm biosecurity	2023 Networks Roadshow	Processor interviews (13)

OUTCOME 1: Innovative Producer Network	OUTCOME 2: Producer Adoption	OUTCOME 3: Service Provider Development
Update network database	Learning modules – small landholder booklet, emergency animal disease preparedness	Train-the-trainer workshops
Electronic signing of contracts	Measure and monitor to manage includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “Foundations of Success” financial business benchmarking workshops (12 groups, 150 producers) - “Measure to manage” production benchmarking (12 groups, 150 producers) - “Cost of Production workshops” (12 groups, 150 producers) - “Hitting the grid” (12 groups (150 enterprises) - “Know your number” (farm emissions calculator) (10 groups (100 enterprises) 	MLA Livestock Advisor Updates
SBVS Survey of producer needs	AgTech Ready Farms workshops	Creating a marketing plan online workshop for sheep stud breeders
Feeding Livestock webpage updates	Development of ‘Risk and Records’ workshop package	Service provider webinars and service provider mentoring
RFQ process developed/ Updated RFT process/ TOR & RFT process developed	Supply chain awareness activities, compliance workshops	Processor survey
Evaluation of MLA tools, resources and programs available for Vic sheep and beef producers	Profitable grazing system groups (4 groups, 37 producers)	Shearing Industry /red meat supply chain webinars
Blueprint for industry detailing the development of successful producer network	Sheep notes	Elders capability building workshop
Development and piloting of KASA tracker tool to evaluate change	Small Landholder booklet/eLearn	Professional Development Guidelines and market research
	AGtech workshops	Tools and resources catalogue
		Coordinator Guidelines
		Group review and planning training (as above)

Additional summary information on the main outcome areas and additional stand-alone pieces of work are provided below.

3.2 Innovative Producer Network (Outcome 1)

A range of innovative and traditional methodologies were used, which have capitalised on Agriculture Victoria's long-standing relationship with producers and service providers to the livestock industry. The project has extended its engagement, scale of the networks, and hence its impact, by innovating in three key areas leading to increased livestock industry performance.

1. **Network Service Offer:** New agricultural technologies, innovative delivery and communication models have been integrated into the network to drive adoption. In addition, mechanisms have been developed to identify and prioritise emerging issues and feeding this intelligence into the Southern Australia Livestock Research Council (SALRC), government and industry decision makers. The development of a network Blueprint has also been a key outcome.
2. **Producers:** New and existing producer groups^{§§} and associate members have benefited from enhanced planning that has delivered programs tailored to their needs, a focus on monitoring and benchmarking at various levels has engaged them, provided exposure to a range of tools and resources for better management of their businesses, and provided a growing focus on the value chain in which they operate.
3. **Service Providers:** Service providers^{***} were supported to undertake training and development to enhance their technical and group facilitation skills, and a focus was placed on their performance in achieving the objectives of this project.

3.3 Producer adoption (Outcome 2)

The existing Best Wool/Best Lamb and BB producer groups (65 in total) were the centre piece for activities in this area where six sessions per year per group were run covering topics of interest to producers. Existing MLA tools, and others in development, were utilised and trialled when interests aligned with the needs of producer groups. The project also focused on supporting other producer groups to support their members, including the Gippsland Agriculture Group, Southern Farming Systems and Perennial Pasture Systems also participated in the project. Analysis was undertaken to develop new approaches to engage segments of the industry that hadn't been reached through existing approaches.

The long-running and successful Livestock Farm Monitor (LFM) project provided a pre-eminent resource for additional farm monitoring and benchmarking comparisons. Full financial analyses were conducted for 30 farm businesses, trialling a group-based approach. Group training activities across a range of topics and additional activities (tours, workshops, awareness raising activities, conferences etc) are summarised in Table 3 above.

^{§§} Existing producer groups were both Best Wool Best Lamb and Better Beef producer groups and other producer groups – for example Landcare, Gippsland Ag Group Farmers (GAgG), Perennial pasture systems (PPS) and Southern Farming Systems (SFS).

^{***} Service providers included pregnancy scanners, vets, livestock agents, co-ordinators of groups and other individual private service providers.

3.4 Service provider development (Outcome 3)

The focus for service providers was on professional training and development. Service providers included pregnancy scanners, vets, livestock agents, coordinators of BWBL and BB groups and other individual private service providers (farm consultants). Conferences for group coordinators, workshops (in person and on-line) for livestock agents, pregnancy scanning workshops, electronic tools and communication channels were developed and delivered. Professional development needs for service providers were assessed and mentoring opportunities were also provided. A survey of Victorian meat processors to assess interest in engagement and use of available market specification tools was also conducted. Main activities are summarised in Table 3 above.

3.5 Formal evaluation

A formal evaluation of some of the project's aspects around impacts and effectiveness was conducted by AgInnovate and Verian, sub-contracted by Agriculture Victoria. A total of 111 producers participated in the survey, with 14 producers and 11 service providers also participating in in-depth interviews. A summary of methodology used is provided in Table 4. The full report is attached as Appendix 2. Lannin et al. (2024) suggested that the response to the survey (n=111) provided a sound overall sample size, but in view of the size of the sample (approximately 4% of the producers who participated in the project), representativeness of results need to be treated with some caution.

Table 4: Overview of methodology and participation in the formal evaluation of the project.

Method/Source	Data type
Workshop with the project team to develop the Theory of Change (ToC) and Key Evaluation Questions (KEQs) to guide the design of the review process.	Scoping
<p>Document review of reports was used to provide contextual understanding and supporting evidence and comparators for evaluation questions.</p> <p>The secondary data used to inform the findings include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - State of the Sector report - State of the Network report - Activity engagement log - Meeting records of Project and Network Advisory Committee - Regional Roadshow planning - Governance documents - Campaign Monitor data (Newsflash) - Newsletter and social media engagement data - Newsletter sign up data - Activity (workshops, webinars, tours etc) tracking records - Post activity survey - Project documents - Other relevant documents developed and shared with stakeholders 	Desktop review
Development, review and refinement of the Data Matrix , designed to guide the survey and discussion guide design, data collection process and reporting.	Scoping

<p>Survey of producers (111 producers participated)</p> <p>Agriculture Victoria distributed the online survey to in-scope Victorian producers who are Network members, or who have attended at least one Network event.</p>	Quantitative
<p>Follow-up in-depth interviews with producers and service providers (14 producers and 11 service providers)</p> <p>Participants were selected by Agriculture Victoria based on their engagement with the Network. Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and were undertaken by Verian researchers via MS Teams or phone.</p>	Qualitative

3.6 Internal Evaluation Workshop

A 90-minute online workshop was held with the Innovative Sheep and Beef Networks project team within Agriculture Victoria on Wednesday 18th December 2024. This workshop identified the key deliverables and successes of the project, and areas for improvement and further development.

3.7 Case Studies

Eleven (11) end-user case studies were developed to demonstrate examples of network improvements and practice change impact attributable to the project. These case studies were collated during December 2024- January 2025 and highlight findings from each of the three project outcome areas (a) changes to the producer network; b) producer adoption; and c) service provider development).

4 Results

The range of innovative and traditional engagement methodologies used have capitalised on Agriculture Victoria’s long-standing relationship with producers and service providers to the livestock industry and has seen the project extend its engagement, scale of the networks, and therefore its impact. A summary of activities conducted is outlined above (see methodologies section), with key results provided here.

The average recommended rating across all the activities and events was 98.69%. The average satisfaction rating was 8.9 out of 10. The average pre workshop knowledge was 4.6/10 which increased to post knowledge of 7.24/10.

4.1 Innovative producer network (Outcome 1)

New agricultural technologies, innovative delivery and communication models have been used and integrated into the BWBL and BB networks to successfully drive adoption. In addition, mechanisms have been developed to identify and prioritise emerging issues and this intelligence has fed into and successfully informed, government and industry decision makers (through the Southern Australia Livestock Research Council (SALRC).

Existing producer groups of BWBL and BB have been at the heart of this project (group coverage across Victoria is shown in Figure 3), along with other existing producer groups (Landcare, Gippsland Ag Group Farmers, Perennial Pasture Systems and Southern Farming Systems). All groups have benefited through the project by providing additional funds and time to enable enhanced planning and specialist topic delivery that have been tailored to producer needs and interests. A particular focus has included monitoring and benchmarking, exposure to a range of tools and resources for better business management and a growing focus on the business environment/value chain in which producers operate.



Figure 3. Victorian producer groups that are currently part of the BWBL and BB networks.

4.1.1 Objective 1.1

The objective was to expand the reach by 2,000 producers (through greater membership and adding value to independent producer networks) through designing innovative approaches and delivery models for facilitating practice change.

The target objective has exceeded expectations. The BWBL and BB producer members increased from 2,707 to 5,485 over the project period, an increase of 2,778 producers (Figure 4). In addition, significant broader industry network⁺⁺⁺ engagement was achieved with total network membership increasing by 3,837. As at June 2024, there were reported to be close to 7,500 network members.

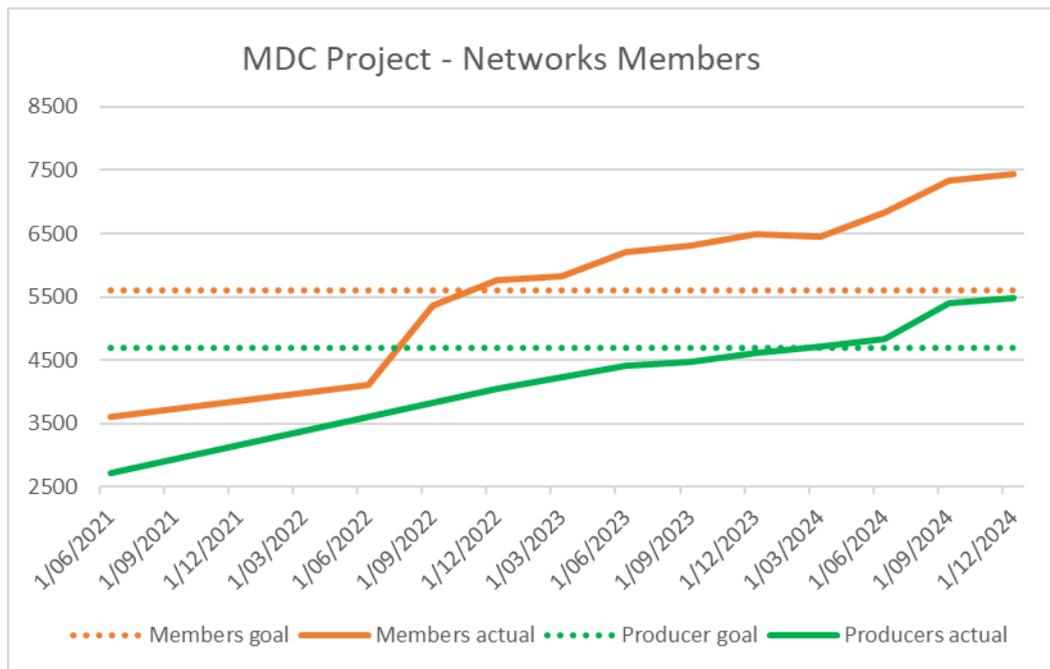


Figure 4. MDC project network members from June 2021 to June 2024

Resourcing from the project enabled delivery of key activities through Agriculture Victoria, industry partners, Network Coordinators and Specialist Deliverers that boosted engagement numbers through activities such as:

- Topic-based groups; *for example, benchmarking groups*. These groups had a set topic to explore across 12-months, were state-wide rather than regionally based (participants came from across Victoria) and disbanded after a set period of delivery.
- Raising the Baa producer group hosted in cooperation with Elders stock agents (also included as a case study as per Table 12).
- 2023 BWBL and BB Regional Roadshows in conjunction with the centralised Conference. Partnered with MLA and AWI to host one-day conferences in Wangaratta, Sale, Buninyong

⁺⁺⁺ Such as agricultural service providers and other more occasional users of the network including subscribers to Newsflash and receipt of SheepNotes.

and Dunkeld. These were attended by over 300 beef and sheep producers. Targeted regional events in conjunction with the annual producer conference.

- Webinar series were initiated at the start of the project, during COVID-19 lockdowns. This allowed the project to continue delivering technical activities on-line. It also provided an opportunity with flexibility delivery that met producer needs by initiating new, non-regional groups; and allowing existing groups to bring-in international speakers on topics they were interested in.
- Digital AgTech suite of events that identified available technology that supports best management practices from simple and inexpensive tool and system to support data management and resource management through to showcasing the latest technology used by processors for assessing carcass quality.
- Membership drives for the *Beef and Sheep Networks Newsflash* (e-newsletter) which is the main channel for communicating news and information to the networks. As of February 2025, the Newsflash had a distribution of 4,120 subscribers. The latest edition (Feb 2025) had an open rate of 32.6% which exceeds industry average. The 'click' rate for the latest Newsflash was 2.1%, which represents 90 recipients clicking on one of the links. By monitoring clicks in each edition, Agriculture Victoria can gauge the type of information that members of the networks are seeking. Since June 2021 the open rate has increased by 4.4%.

The MDC funding (and the change in delivery modes because of COVID-19) meant that groups were able to be introduced to expertise and speakers from all over the world. This project gave coordinators the opportunity to trial and pilot new approaches to delivery which has helped re-invigorate producer engagement in groups and networks.

4.1.2- Objective 1.2

This objective sought to define the diverse needs and motivations of Victorian farmers and tailor services in response to these identified segments.

Identification of market segments for engagement and learning

Livestock producers in Victoria are diverse and can have very different needs according to their age/stage of farming, level of financial burden, size and scale of enterprise(s), geographical constraints, level of comfort with technology and other factors. Network Coordinators have strong understanding of local, context specific factors that will affect producers' interest in particular topics, capacity to use tools and ability/capacity to adopt innovations. Five market segments stand out in terms of different needs for engagement and learning:

- Older farmers who are financially comfortable, limited risk appetite, low or no debt and sometimes more limited computer skills. Many of these farmers are members of the existing BWBL and BB network.
- Young farm entrants who typically have high levels of debt, need to take more risks to establish themselves and who have much stronger computer skills. These farmers have different capability and skill development needs and learning styles including being more readily adopters of e-learning and technology.

- Hard to reach producers, being those who traditionally do not use Agriculture Victoria services. Growing this cohort requires working with their existing sources of information provision such as livestock agents and pregnancy scanners.
- Geographically spread producers with similar interests. This type of group is suited to online activities.
- Different production system-based focus such as high and low rainfall or scale of operation or different enterprises.

Understanding preferences for receiving information

This project included work by Wilkinson and Schelfhorst (2024)^{***} to understand Victorian livestock farmers' preferences for receiving information, including information from Agriculture Victoria. The report (appendix 5) provided an understanding of how livestock producers want to receive information, including preferences for content types relevant to their business. Key findings of this work included:

- Information receipt. No producers interviewed said they received all their information electronically or all on paper.
 - Young producers indicated a preference for receiving information electronically, often because they could look at it on their phone, which they took everywhere.
 - Older producers preferred to receive information on paper, based on habits and lack of computer experience.
 - Half of the respondents said they received farming newsletters. When asked without any prompting to name the newsletters they received, the most named were Feedback (published by Meat and Livestock Australia), and Beyond the Bale (published by Australian Wool Innovation). After prompting, SheepNotes was the most frequently mentioned newsletter, with 44 per cent of all respondents recalling receiving it. SheepNotes was highly regarded by most interviewees. Recall of various email newsletters, whether unprompted or prompted, was low.
- Information seeking. Most producers search for information electronically, even those with a preference for receiving information on paper.
 - Websites were by far the most used channel across several kinds of information farmers might be seeking, followed by personal face-to-face contact, then physical newspapers.
 - Just over half of respondents acknowledged the way they received information was likely to change over the next five years, with increasingly less information in paper form.
- Most producers have internet connection, with only 12% having connectivity issues.
- Agriculture Victoria is seen as positive but not strongly so.
 - Agriculture Victoria continues to be seen as impartial and well-targeted.

^{***} The research included a review of relevant literature, a series of in-depth qualitative interviews with 12 Victorian broadacre farmers, and a quantitative telephone survey of 150 Victorian livestock farmers with effort made for participants to be representative of the range of livestock enterprises covering the state. Attached as Appendix 5.

- At least three-quarters of respondents said they would be likely to read a warning from Agriculture Victoria through any channel of an upcoming potential problem such as a pest or disease outbreak, or some information on new laws, regulations or rules.
- Between half and two-thirds said they would be likely to read information from Agriculture Victoria on emergency recovery or news of an upcoming event.
- Sheep notes (distributed to almost every sheep producer in Victoria) was by far the most common single piece of information received by producers. The articles were seen as relevant and often filed away for reference, even for some aspects of beef production.
- Agriculture Victoria had less contact with beef producers (59% producers) than sheep or sheep-beef producers (87%). SheepNotes is a key part of the reason why Agriculture Victoria has better reach among sheep farmers than beef farmers, as well as higher standing.
- Peer to peer learning is highly successful with producers preferring to share experiences and learn from each other.

The recommendations of this report have been used by Agriculture Victoria to tailor project communications to include a variety of approaches. In particular, the project increased its offerings to tailor its services for a variety of benchmarking activities, more on-line delivery, targeting of young farmer groups and increased use of topic-based groups.

Barriers to adoption

Understanding barriers to adoption within a local context is critical in tailoring services. Barriers to adoption identified through this project coincided well with adoption theory as neatly and succinctly identified by Kuehne et al. (2017), namely:

- Relative advantage for the local farmer population (which is affected by how profit and/or environmentally motivated the producer is, risk orientation, enterprise scale, management time horizon and short-term constraints).
- Complexity of the change to adopt (affected by ease of trialling, the degree to which results are observable).
- Factors that support the ability to learn (including advisory support, group involvement, existing relevant skills and knowledge, practice awareness).
- Relative advantage of the practice (important factors are the relative up-front costs of the practice, reversibility of the practice, profit benefits in years it is used, future profit benefits, time for profit to be realised, environmental impact, time for environmental impacts to be realised, risk, ease and convenience).

Resourcing from the project enabled different approaches to be piloted to incorporate understanding of communication preferences. The project also aided in targeting of different industry segments and development of novel ways to overcome barriers to adoption such as through topic-based groups and the measure to manage continuum. Targeting a network of networks enhanced our ability to make new producer connections and establish new approaches to

progress producers to improve enterprise productivity and profitability, which are reported under Outcome 2.

Tools, systems and products to support a learning continuum

Evaluation of MLA tools, resources and programs was an important part of the network service offering. The project found that many livestock producers still have an aversion to pay for services particularly amongst smaller and older producers. The MDC project helped to offset some of the costs for MLA paid products (e.g. T90, Building better breeders, Business Edge products, Profitable Grazing Systems), helping to overcome this barrier and build awareness and a reputation for the products.

One of the long-term aims of the project is that growers are encouraged to continually learn over time, whilst developing skills and building confidence for making complex system-based decisions to make informed changes. Engagement in the Network assists growers to improve their farm businesses, grazing management, and livestock management through incremental change. To make bigger and more complex changes they need to be involved for a longer period of time. The formal evaluation found that 51% of survey respondents said they had been involved with the Network for over 5-years; and that 60% had said that ‘opportunities for group interaction and networking / exchange of knowledge’ was one of the key strengths of the Network. This demonstrates that participating producers value the exchange of knowledge and are on a ‘learning journey’ and that once a new cohort of producers are engaged, many remain connected.

The Innovative Sheep and Beef Networks also undertook a major re-design of the annual strategic review and planning process for current and new producer groups. This was presented at the 2021 Coordinators’ Conference and reviewed by Inspiring Excellence in 2024. The new strategic review and planning process coincided with a move across to a new communication platform via SharePoint for network data storage, and implementation of a WhatsApp Group for Group Coordinators. These initiatives have worked together to create a more coordinated approach to planning, reviewing and reporting for Network groups, as demonstrated by comments in the formal evaluation in-depth interviews^{§§§}. The communication platform has allowed for opportunities to share information, see what other groups plans are and share videos. It has provided a mechanism for two-way information flow. The increased efficiency of this system means less time on administration for coordinators so they can concentrate on delivering to producers and for industry to have access to real time intelligence.

The development of a Coordinators Handbook and the Coordinators Annual Planning Process has also been a positive initiative from this project. It provides clarity about roles and responsibilities for new (and existing) group coordinators and will lead to a more consistent annual plan between groups. This will be especially important as new group coordinators come into the network. The documented process for developing a clear plan of activities aligned to the group’s collective farm

^{§§§} For example comments from group coordinators included that “The planning and review tool has really given more structure to meetings with more tasks and a framework to think back and forward – really helpful to help guide them” and “The annual planning and review frameworks are phenomenal. I really like what they have done there. I want that to be my standard way of doing things moving forward. They have been really well received by the group.” Producer comments included that “(The) annual planning and review process is effective as it’s flexible and sessions and aligned to quiet times of the Beef production season” and that “The new process ensures we have more equal say in its development”.

business goals is complemented by training for coordinators to improve group performance and to systematically build on previous experiences and knowledge.

An important but less direct output from the project included development of a standardised Request for Quote process to make it simpler for network coordinators to apply for additional grants for groups, enabling easier access to federal drought funding.

The formation of “specific issue-based” groups (with a defined lifespan) were piloted throughout the course of the project. A segment of producers that was identified as a target area were those that don't want to participate in a group that doesn't have a defined topic or length of participation. Topic based groups were piloted to address this barrier of producer engagement.

An unintended outcome of one of these groups was the age distribution and mix of experience, offering an opportunity for younger members to benefit from others extensive expertise and for younger members to challenge existing paradigms. It is an aim of the traditional network groups but came to the fore in this instance.

One group was formed through a collaboration with an Elders livestock agent, providing access to clients and a network of networks. It is a different philosophy of engaging producers compared to our existing network model of self-directed groups.

Victorian sheep and beef producers faced a range of different emergencies including COVID-19 lockdowns, floods, fires and drought. Agriculture Victoria, through the project and with existing tools and resources available, was able to support localised groups across the State. After conducting a needs analysis of producers following each of these emergencies, the project was able respond to identified needs and develop programs that focussed on supporting plans for returning to business by engaging specialist speakers on key topics.

This unplanned outcome supported industry during times of emergency response by tailoring services to meet their individual needs. For example, the Innovative Networks project was used by Agriculture Victoria to provide support for landholders impacted by the Langkoop/Poolaijelo, grass fire near the South Australian border in December 2021 which burnt 7332 hectares. The project provided tailored support in bushfire recovery to the affected producers. Groups were also established to support producers in south-western Victoria, through the Glenelg BestWool-BestLamb group, in drought (2024) which led to partnering and delivery other sessions in the South-West region. Groups established during times of emergency and recovery demonstrate clearly the ability of the project to tailor its services in response to target audiences (identified segments).

Another example of similar work in this area took place during COVID-19 where the project pivoted to support meat processors were supported during lockdowns, using intelligence through the network of networks to outline economic, social and animal welfare implications of processor shutdowns and to help processors navigate the Victorian Government Directions.

4.1.3 - Objective 1.3

This objective sought to equip R&D providers, government and industry decision makers with intelligence and knowledge that increases their understanding of the Victorian livestock sector's needs.

Activities contributing to meeting this objective include State of the Sector reports, development of a Network Blueprint, participation of advisory committees, issues-based campaigns and electronic information development.

The State of the Sector reports are written twice a year and cover key challenges, emerging issues, how the Agriculture Victoria Meat and Wool Services program is delivering to address challenges and issues, regional seasonality and production differences and how Agriculture Victoria is responding to help industry issues. These reports inform Agriculture Victoria which enable staff to provide up to date and informed input into committees and other industry outlets. For example, the Agriculture Victoria Program Manager Meat and Wool Services sits on Southern Australian Livestock Research Council (SALRC). There are also sub-groups (western, northern and southern) that Agriculture Victoria staff participate in, with the objective of feeding priorities to MLA. The work also helps inform Agriculture Victoria's policy directions, initiatives and advice to the Minister of Agriculture in Victoria.

Another intended deliverable from the State of the Sector reports was for stronger engagement with MLA Program Managers. However, this has not been as successful in practice as hoped for and it is appreciated that MLA Program Managers have many competing demands. Input through SALRC is expected to be sufficient, however Agriculture Victoria is more than happy to discuss how MLA engagement can be improved.

Arguably the most important output for this objective has been the development of a Blueprint for the Victorian sheep and beef networks (Hickey and Trompf, 2025) attached as Appendix 3. The Blueprint has been developed as a strategic document for guidance on how to successfully support and sustain the successful BWBL and BB networks in Victoria through continued public and private investment over the next four-years. The Blueprint has four foundational areas: 1) Growth; 2) Knowledge and information exchange; 3) Service provider building capacity; 4) Consultation and advocacy. A summary of foundation areas, focus areas and potential actions is described in Table 5. In addition to the foundation objectives, the Blueprint also outlines enhanced elements that, with both public and private investment over the next four-year period, could be realised as key elements of the BWBL and BB networks on an ongoing basis.

Additional work in this project was that a selected group of beef and sheep producers were engaged as a Network Advisory Committee to help advise and discuss aspects of the project and provide feedback. This group met quarterly.

Several issue-based campaigns (e.g. foot and mouth disease, flood and fire recovery) have also helped to equip decision-makers with timely information and intelligence.

The feeding livestock website (<https://www.feedinglivestock.vic.gov.au/>) provides excellent resources and a stand-alone website. MDC has been a significant contributor to the website through investment in some of the tools found on the website. This website has been a very successful vehicle for providing high quality information to producers. Over 30,000 users visit the site a year with most people viewing two pages per session. Users visited a range of pages such as useful tables (sheep and beef); feed values; tools and calculators (sheep and beef): pasture identification and water resources. Insights into the page's most regularly viewed has assisted us to better target and provide technical support.

An in-depth interview with Agriculture Victoria project staff outlined that the project had positive impacts on relationships across the sector (both within industry and government).

Table 5. Livestock network Blueprint foundational objectives, focus areas and potential actions (Hickey and Trompf, 2025).

Objective	Description	Focus Areas	Potential Actions
Growth:	Increase membership, participation, and geographic coverage of network members and groups.	<p><u>Member Value (Focus Area 1):</u> Emphasise that growing the network enhances member value through a more extensive peer network, access to diverse expertise, and collective bargaining power.</p> <p><u>Service Provider Engagement (Focus Area 2):</u> Engage service providers to offer targeted support and resources that attract new members and retain existing ones.</p> <p><u>Funder Involvement (Focus Area 3):</u> Highlight the role of funders in supporting initiatives that drive network expansion and increased participation.</p>	<p>Develop recruitment campaigns emphasising the benefits of membership.</p> <p>Partner with service providers to offer incentives for joining, such as conference discounts.</p> <p>Secure funding for regional outreach and promotional activities to increase geographic coverage.</p>
Knowledge and Information exchange:	<p>Enhance the exchange of information and experience of best practices, research, and innovations to build profitability, productivity and resilience to shocks and challenges.</p> <p>Foster better producer connections and information exchange with supply chains to increase compliance with market specifications.</p> <p>Integrate sustainable practices and ensure the network contributes to environmental and economic sustainability.</p>	<p><u>Member Value (Focus Area 1):</u> Ensure that knowledge-sharing initiatives provide direct, practical benefits to members, improving their farming and business outcomes.</p> <p><u>Service Provider Engagement (Focus Area 2):</u> Collaborate with service providers to deliver latest research and innovations tailored to member needs.</p> <p><u>Leveraging Network Power (Focus Area 4):</u> Use the network's collective knowledge to support and influence industry practices, government priorities and address key issues like climate change, resilience and sustainability.</p>	<p>Deliver timely and targeted webinars, workshops, roadshows and field days/farm walks focused on best practices and innovations.</p> <p>Develop a digital platform (e.g. online community of practice) for members to share experiences and access research.</p> <p>Partner with service providers to co-create content and provide expert-led training sessions.</p>
Service provider capacity building	Providing greater professional development opportunities for service providers to support the growth and prosperity of Victoria's beef and sheep industries.	<p><u>Member Value (Focus Area 1):</u> Equip service providers with tools and knowledge to deliver practical, tailored solutions that directly improve network members' farming businesses.</p> <p>Provide feedback mechanisms to ensure service providers align their offerings with member needs.</p>	<p>Training and Development: Develop and deliver targeted training programs to enhance the technical and advisory skills of service providers.</p> <p>Peer learning: Establish regular forums for service providers to share experiences, research and innovations.</p>

Objective	Description	Focus Areas	Potential Actions
	Better training for service providers involved, or wanting to be involved with facilitating groups.	<p><u>Service Provider Engagement (Focus Area 2)</u>: Foster strong, collaborative partnerships with service providers by organising joint training programs, practical demonstrations and networking events.</p> <p>Build a community of practice among service providers to share insights and best practices.</p> <p><u>Funder Involvement (Focus Area 3)</u>: Secure funding to support service provider training programs and initiatives aimed at enhancing their effectiveness.</p> <p>Collaborate with funders to prioritise capacity-building projects that directly impact the network's success.</p> <p><u>Leveraging Network Power (Focus Area 4)</u>: Use the collective expertise of the network to advocate for better resources for service providers.</p> <p>Highlight the role of service providers in addressing critical industry issues such as climate change, carbon emissions and drought resilience.</p>	<p>Performance Metrics: Implement a system to evaluate the impact of service providers on network members and use insights for continuous improvement.</p> <p>Funding Partnerships: Identify and engage with funders to support capacity-building initiatives.</p>
Consultation and advocacy	Better position the network producer groups as a trusted platform for consultation on priority setting for investment, piloting new government and industry initiatives and supporting development of government/industry policy.	<p><u>Member Value (Focus Area 1)</u>: Ensure the network is actively consulted on government and industry initiatives that affect the industry, enabling members to benefit from policies and programs tailored to their needs.</p> <p>Develop mechanisms to gather and synthesise member insights into actionable input for consultations, ensuring their voices shape the outcomes of major initiatives.</p> <p><u>Service Provider Engagement (Focus Area 2)</u>: Facilitate service provider consultation to ensure cohesive, practical outcomes that benefit all members.</p> <p><u>Funder Involvement (Focus Area 3)</u>: Advocate for funders to include the network in consultation processes as a critical stakeholder for rural economic development and innovation.</p>	<p>Consultation Pipeline: Build a proactive pipeline of engagement opportunities by monitoring government and industry announcements.</p> <p>Policy Briefings: Prepare concise briefing papers based on member input for use in consultations.</p> <p>Feedback Mechanisms: Establish feedback loops to inform members about outcomes from consultations and advocacy efforts.</p> <p>Stakeholder Relations: Strengthen relationships with key government and industry contacts to position the network as a trusted partner.</p>

Objective	Description	Focus Areas	Potential Actions
		<p>Ensure funding priorities are informed by consultation with producers, driving better alignment between financial support and real-world challenges.</p> <p><u>Leveraging Network Power (Focus Area 4)</u>: Use the network’s collective voice to shape consultation processes on industry priorities like climate change, carbon emissions, emergency response and drought.</p> <p>Position the network as a central conduit for gathering and providing grassroots insights and intelligence, helping policymakers and industry leaders design programs with meaningful impact.</p>	

4.2 Producer adoption (Outcome 2)

The aim was to see producers measuring, monitoring and managing key profit drivers and risks, and implementing the technologies and management practices required to improve their business performance.

Producers engaged in project activities successfully built their skills and knowledge and reported a strong intention to adopt changes in their management practices as a result.

Table 6 summarises the numbers of activities held in each region and shows that regionally based activities were close to proportional to the number of farm businesses. Table 7 summarises the types of activities conducted and shows that the largest group of activities were skills and knowledge development. A total of 2,778 producers participated in the activities.

Table 6. Number of producer group activities across regions (May 2021-December 2024).

Area/region	Number of activities	Estimated no. farm businesses	Estimated livestock number
Statewide	112		
National	8		
Interstate	12		
South East	30	3,261	1,176,000
South West	86	7,405	10,972,000
Northern	82	7,013	4,960,098
Metropolitan		1,023	379,000
Total	330	18,702	17,488,000

Table 7. Activity categories for producer group activities (May 2021-December 2024).

Number of activities	Activity Category	Example activities
84	Category A - awareness	Webinar Article/handout Social media post Field day Conference
133	Category B – knowledge and skills	Workshop Online workshop eLearn
31	Category C - adoption	Producer demonstration site Profitable Grazing Systems SLP groups
82	Other	
330	Total	

4.2.1 Objective 2.1

The intent of this objective was to work with producers to set priority production and financial targets/benchmarks and effectively manage their enterprises to achieve them. A total of 70 benchmarking activities were conducted and involved a total of 1,035 producer attendees.

The lack of measuring and monitoring to manage on-farm was identified as a barrier to livestock producers. To overcome this key adoption barrier, a pathway was developed to take producers on a journey from simple to more complex approaches with the aim they would progress along a continuum of learning. This included an:

- *Introductory measure* - to manage products, starting with introducing producers to simple and practical concepts, eg worm egg counts and the resulting decisions made by understanding the status.
- *Intermediate products* - included know your number, helping producers to understand sources of carbon emissions.
- *High level products* - full business analysis with Livestock Farm Monitor.

Producers were well engaged and excited about knowing and understanding data rather than using a blanket approach and could see benefits in saving time and money. The approach generated interest in more measurements, leading to a pattern of collecting more data to inform and make change.

Introductory Measures: The Measure to Manage approach is a practical approach where participating producers were encouraged to measure key farm production drivers such as lambing or calving statistics (e.g. T90 -towards 90% survival for sheep), pasture growth rates, grazing days, or worm numbers as some examples. This encouraged them on the ‘adoption pathway’ and to increase their knowledge, attitude, skills, or aspirations in a chosen topic. The pathway has been re-designed in this project and included piloting the use of a KASA tracker (reported Outcome 3) which can be used regularly by participants, group coordinators and project managers to determine where producers are along the adoption pathway. This has been developed into a package of tools and resources for producers groups, and now has the name ‘*Skills Muster*’. An overview document for use at producer workshops is attached as Appendix 4. A summary of Measure to Manage production workshop topics, numbers, satisfaction levels and producer recommendation levels are shown in Table 8. Workshops were rated as very successful.

Intermediate measures : The Victorian Government On-Farm Emissions Action Plan Pilot provides practical information, tools and services to support farmers to understand and reduce emissions. The Pilot worked with farmers one-on-one to undertake an audit and access grant. This pilot was not designed or targeted to engage with large numbers or groups of producers. The Innovative Networks Project trialled a group approach to helping producers calculate their farm emissions. An interactive workshop was designed and delivered by Professor Richard Eckard (University of Melbourne) enabling producers to use their own data to calculate their carbon number for their farm. Producers were educated on why they need to know their numbers, learnt about key indicators, and how to trouble shoot problems whilst using the MLA Carbon Calculator for their farm. Seventy-one producers were involved in four group-based carbon benchmarking activities and there was an overall satisfaction score of 85% for the events. Consistent increases in knowledge capacity were also recorded and 68% of participants surveyed recorded that they would make changes to their

farm practices as a result of the workshop. The summary outcome table lists “Know your number” (farm emissions calculator) (target of 10 groups and 100 enterprises).

High level (Financial) benchmarking: The Livestock Farm Monitor Project (LFMP) is Agriculture Victoria’s primary source of farm-level information for sheep and beef production practices, resource use, and economic data. In 2023–24, the Livestock Farm Monitor Project (LFMP) provided 133 Victorian sheep, beef and stock/ cropping farmers with detailed financial and production performance information. Of the 133 farms that participated, 105 are continuing farms from 2022–23 and 30 farms are new to LFMP and can be attributed to this project. The innovative networks project piloted taking this activity from an individual level to group-based data collection and encouraged benchmarking discussion within the group environment. It is more efficient for a service provider to collect the data at this level. Sharing and discussing within a group, where there is often a high level of trust and ability to challenge each other, enables producers to identify where their greatest gains can be made compared to a locally relevant farm business.

Group coordinators reported that a mix of farmers were involved, from those that kept good records to those who did not (particularly new entrants to farming). Workshops highlighted areas of practice change producers were keen to implement including better record keeping, inventory stocktake, drilling down into cattle classes and asset registers. Overall, the work allowed farmers to take the time to look at their business and see how their production and financial data correlated. The majority of farmers were quite surprised with some of their costs. Another important issue raised is that it takes considerable time to develop trust amongst a group, which was difficult for new compared with more mature groups.

Along with the formal benchmarking like livestock farm monitor, the ‘Foundations of Success’ financial business benchmarking workshops (12 groups, 150 producers) and ‘Cost of Production workshops’ (12 groups, 150 producers) offered more practical production benchmarks to engage producers at an earlier learning stage. These provide examples of introductory benchmarking measures.

Table 8. Measure to Manage production workshop topics, producer numbers, satisfaction levels and producer recommendation levels.

Workshop learning outcome area	Foundations of success	Measure to Manage	Cost of Production	Hitting the grid	Know your number	LFMP businesses
Completed workshops/target	12/12	14/12	12/12	12/12	11/10	4 courses
Participants/target	197/150	264/150	173/150	191/150	149/100	45/30
Satisfaction level (out of 10)	9.2	9.1	8.9	8.9	8.6	9.6
% producer recommendation	100	100	99.1	100	95.2	100

Other topic based activities: A segment of producers that was identified as a target area were those that prefer to participate in a group with a defined and relevant topic for a specific period of time. Topic based groups were piloted to address this barrier of producer engagement.

One group was formed through a collaboration with an Elders livestock agent, Raising the Baa, providing access to their client base and connecting between networks The group focussed on

improving lamb survival through better ewe management, with several participants having completed Lifetime Ewe.

An unintended outcome of one of these groups was the age distribution and mix of experience, offering an opportunity for younger members to benefit from others extensive expertise and for younger members to challenge existing paradigms. It is an aim of the traditional network groups but came to the fore in this instance.

Eighty-seven percent of participants surveyed were satisfied with the project with 89% responding that they had learned something new over the past 12 months, with the remaining commenting that it reinforced what they were already doing and 66.67% likely to implement changes within their business because of the project.

A range of other topic-based activities were conducted. Pasture paramedic; Barbers pole – drench resistance; Cost of production; Basic value chain feedback to understand specifications required by processors; Methane emissions calculator; Fire recovery; Biosecurity topics.

Group coordinators and producers reported a range of key changes as a result of the project, such as improved data collection and recording, confident in using the MLA calculator, the need to sow more trees, understanding how to reduce GHG emissions easily and in a profitable manner, farm management options for economically justifiable options to reduce emissions improve production efficiency, improved feeding practices, and grazing management

In-depth interviews, and the on-line survey from the formal evaluation (Lannin et al. 2024) showed that producers had implemented new technologies and management practices because of participation in the Network. As an extension/change management project, it is also important to note that change looks different for different businesses and on-farm change is a process.

4.2.2 Objective 2.2

This objective was around providing producers improved access to best practice technology and management innovations to make appropriate changes within their business.

AgTech activities were a key component in meeting this objective. A total of 26 activities were undertaken, attended by 459 producers and 32 service providers with an average satisfaction rating of 8.7 and a 100% producer recommendation to others.

AgTech activities comprised AgTechApril social media and communications activities, AgTech Ready workshops and AgTech focussed tours. A range of activities were delivered that provided a mechanism for producers to effectively engage with the ag technology sector including digital farms and new technologies. Topics covered included uncovering digital technologies, biosecurity, BredWellFedWell, IED/National Livestock Identification Systems (NLIS) workshops, Soil moisture monitoring and Artificial Intelligence. The AgTech Ready workshop topics, participant numbers and satisfaction levels are shown in Table 9. The AgTech events were very highly rated.

Table 9. AgTech Ready farm workshop topics, participants and satisfaction levels.

Activity name and location	Skills and knowledge	Number of participants	Ave Satisfaction level (out of 10)	% producer recommendation
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AgTech Farm Ready workshop – Pilot session 1/4, Dunkeld	Identifying AgTech that supports business objectives	16	8.7	100
AgTech Farm Ready workshop – Pilot session 2/4, Dunkeld	Using AgTech to solve problems – Farm water supplies	16	8.7	100
AgTech Farm Ready workshop – Pilot session 3/4, Dunkeld	Using AgTech to solve problems – Farm record keeping	16	8.7	100
AgTech Farm Ready workshop – Pilot session 4/4, Dunkeld	Creating your AgTech ready farm plan	16	8.7	100
Livestock EID practical workshop with Gallagher, Corryong	Use of EID equipment to record livestock production data	16	8.4	91
BredWellFedWell - Southern beef pilot meeting -online	Use of breeding values to select bulls, Agtech tools to support managing and monitoring nutrition req's of cattle	5	*	*
WD BB FBR group - AgTech & Cybersecurity workshop, Hamilton	Safe use of cloud storage systems for farm management software	8	9.5	100
PPS AgTech workshop with AgriFutures, Ararat	AgTech supporting objective carcass measurement, safe vaccination techniques	11	*	*
PPS Ag Tech tour – 2 days, Struan	Identifying AgTech that supports business objectives	36	9.6	100
Soil moisture monitoring workshop - online	Using SMM data to forecast pasture production	9	9.2	100
Fixed time AI in beef cattle, Hamilton	The use of AI to increase genetic gain in commercial beef herds	15	9.6	100

* Not collected

The regional annual roadshows have increased MLA brand and presence in Victoria. Roadshows were attended by MLA, AWI and Agriculture Victoria staff, with MLA branding and product information highly visible. The roadshows also contributed to engaging new producers who had not been previously engaged through the BWBL BB network. The roadshows also provided an opportunity to highlight a range of AgTech opportunities through the trade stalls and the information packs provided to participants.

The BWBL / BB Annual conference provided a major opportunity for livestock producers to increase awareness about best practice technology and the latest innovations. Approximately 400 sheep and 300 beef producers attend these popular conferences annually.

A 'Risk and Records' workshop package was developed around a facilitated group extension program to develop livestock managers' understanding, skills and confidence to implement traceability and biosecurity systems that underpin and protect Victoria's livestock industry. A series of four learning

modules presented as stand-alone workshops were run on farms to increase producer awareness of farm risks. They also covered the importance of keeping records on animal health on drench and drench resistance, on-farm biosecurity to ensure the use of systems that underpin Victoria's biosecurity and product assurance. The Innovative Networks project contributed to the development of the 'Risk and Records' workshop package by mentoring Agriculture Services (or AV) staff on designing and delivering the extension package. One hundred and eighty-nine participants gave the workshops a 100% recommendation rating, an average satisfaction rating of 9.2 out of 10 and a significant improvement in knowledge and skills, from an average of 5.4 before to 8.1 after the workshops. Due to COVID 19, delivery shifted online and enabled a significant increase in the number of producers not previously engaged and led to an improved design of online workshops. Webinars were also delivered to transporters and processors to build awareness through the heightened risk of Foot-and-Mouth Disease (FMD).

Profitable Grazing Systems (PGS), one of MLA's flagship adoption programs, is a group-based training program which uses supported learning packages (SLPs) to deliver training and coaching over several months and up to a year to improve producer skills and knowledge. Through PGS, participants develop and practice skills with small groups of like-minded producers to improve business performance. The innovative Networks project initiated and supported four groups to undertake Building Better Breeders (x2) and Grass to Dollars (X2) to 37 producers. These workshops also enabled mentoring of two new delivers to increase capacity for delivery of MLA's adoption program.

A part of this project outcome was to enable the delivery of highly valued products and services, including a range of industry tools, resources and programs. For example, the MLA, Agriculture Victoria, EverGraze and Sheep CRC suite of resources. The resources were demonstrated to group coordinators as a part of the Coordinators Conferences, and to producers via events, roadshows, webinars and through the online newsletter. Building familiarity with the range of products available has increased awareness but also some confusion as there are often multiple products for individual themes, often with similar content. Comments from coordinators included that there are a wide range of tools available and the extent to which they are used varies. Much of the content is applicable, but it is dominated by written content and does not encourage learning where there is a visual learning preference. An audit and review of the products was undertaken outside this project by Cam Nicolson which has made several suggestions for the future development of material.

4.2.3 Objective 2.3

This objective focussed on improving producers understanding and responsiveness to market signals, where they exist.

When the project was originally developed, there was an intent for MLA to co-fund supply chain coordinators in meat processors, however this has not eventuated to the extent first-thought. This, combined with the lack of uptake of MyFeedBack from processors has limited the full achievement of this objective. The following was implemented as an alternative with support from the MLA program Manager.

A key activity was 'Hitting the grid' which involved 12 groups (150 producers). A wide variety of activities were delivered as part of the 'Hitting the grid'. Workshops focused on improved genetic selection, improving pasture management and setting targets to meet livestock growth and turnover

targets, using low stress stock handling, improved animal health practices and using Agtech in the supply chain. All workshops were designed to equip producers with the skills and knowledge needed to meet target markets, minimize carcass quality impacts, and achieve product improvements and efficiency gains both on-farm and in the supply chain. As a result of attending these workshops, most producers felt more confident in implementing new practices.

The Innovative networks project manager represented Agriculture Victoria on the Advanced Livestock Measurement Technologies (ALMTech) Supply Chain Group. In the absence of Victorian supply chain coordinators in processing plants, the linkages with the AlmTech supply Chain group were valuable in extension activities offered to producers.

Two "Hitting the Grid" workshops were delivered in collaboration with the AlmTech project to boost producer engagement and understanding of supply chain technology. Producers participated in a tour of a meat processing facility, covering topics such as individual carcass tracking, plant innovations, and the use of DEXA technology. The workshop also included a farm visit where discussions focused on carcass feedback linkages, genetic selection, the Ram Select tool, and effective animal health plans to prevent carcass wastage. On-farm Agtech use was also covered, integrating mapping for improved record-keeping to enhance traceability and consumer confidence. The final part of the session was an interactive presentation of the myFeedback Tool, which included introducing the aim of the tool, how to use it, and scenarios to highlight the data that is captured and available to producers. The producers found the tool valuable and were keen to investigate it further.

Workshop participants rated their knowledge improvement on a scale of 1 to 10, from 5 before to 8 after the workshop (an increase of 3). The workshops received an average satisfaction rating of 9.3 out of 10, with 100% of participants recommending the event to others. Furthermore, 90% of participants indicated they were likely to implement new practices as a result of the workshops.

A webinar for producers was held to feature the MLA myFeedback tool to help producers see how they could meet market specifications through NLIS carcass tracing and increase responsiveness to market signals. This webinar was designed for both beef and sheep producers and took producers on a tour of the myFeedback tool, including how the program functions, as well as working through analysing and interpreting feedback data for both beef and sheep. 81 producers registered and the event scored an average satisfaction rating of 8/10 with 100% recommending to others. 100% of participants indicated they would make a change (86% very likely to make a change and 14% likely).

This project successfully engaged smaller-scale producers and new entrants to farming, through piloting tailored workshops, online webinars and resources. This group often lacks the knowledge, skills, and understanding of agriculture and the mandatory requirements for Victorian producers. The language used in the booklets is purposefully jargon-free with promotion of terms that can be used by the reader to search for further information. Engaging with small landholders is crucial for upskilling, as they pose an increased biosecurity risk to Victorian agriculture. Additionally, there are expanding opportunities for small-scale producers to increase their income through agricultural development, provided they develop the correct business model and skills.

Several resources were developed specifically for small landholders in response to identified needs, including update to the Small Landholders booklet, an eLearn to promote good biosecurity practices and other modules for addressing issues landholders need to consider, particularly relating to their obligations. These tools were promoted and used at face-to-face events, to increase uptake.

4.3 Service provider development (Outcome 3)

Service Provider Development: Service providers to the red meat industry are motivating and supporting producers to implement the technologies and management practices required to improve their business performance.

Across all activities conducted in this project a total of 1,036 service providers were recorded as attending activities, along with 103 departmental staff and 288 other agency staff.

4.3.1 Objective 3.1

This objective was to engage in opportunities to improve service providers' capability (skills and knowledge pertaining to latest R&D outcomes, business performance and livestock production benchmarks).

The project piloted building the capacity of three targeted groups of service providers:

1. BWBL and BB coordinators who are key to driving the success of the producer groups by building relationships that allow producers to be challenged and supported through the adoption process.
2. Stock Agents who engage a broad network of sheep and beef producers and have strong relationships with these producers reported under objective 3.2.
3. Pregnancy scanners who play a critical role in providing data to enable producers to improve management and increase lamb and ewe survival.

Six activities specifically targeting service provider capability development were conducted and involved 22 service providers.

BWBL and BB group coordinators: This group is the largest cohort of service providers in the project in both the public and private sectors. There is an ongoing need for training and capability development for this cohort. Key activities included mentoring to helping develop new service providers to develop skills in delivering products and services including MLA products, Livestock Farm Monitor delivery training for coordinators. The BWBL BB Annual conference provided opportunity to increase awareness about best practice technology and the latest innovations as well as networking for service providers from both government and private industry. Development of a WhatsApp for groups/coordinators, use of electronic signatures for contracts, development of a more standardised process to enable coordinators to more efficiently respond to request for tender processes and use of a Sharepoint site were also useful developments.

The annual two-day coordinator conference is an important part of the network activities. Evaluations of the coordinator conferences have been highly positive (see Table 10). It is always a challenge for the networks to cater for the vast variation in coordinator skills and experience, and newer service providers found conferences a great opportunity to expand their network, and growth their skills. The average recommend rating for conferences was 98.33%. The average satisfaction rating was 8.2 out of 10.

Table 10. Annual conference coordinator feedback.

Year	Satisfaction rating out of 10	Recommend to others
2022	8.6	100%
2023	7.7	95%
2024	8.4	100%

Pregnancy scanning capability development: Very successful activities involved the development of capability amongst 20 pregnancy scanner service providers. Pregnancy scanners interact with a significant number of sheep producers which provided the opportunity to further enhance producer engagement; the workshop participants scan 3 million ewes per year. A barrier to ongoing adoption has been identified where a significant number of producers have had a bad experience with scanning and as a result, discontinue scanning altogether. There is opportunity to improve outcomes for lamb survival given that there is increasing prevalence of triplet bearing ewes (due to more composite and cross bred ewes and the application of lifetime ewe principles leading to higher conception rates for triplets).

The project engaged with scanners in a pilot project to build scanners confidence to offer a service for triplet scanning. Pregnancy scanners were targeted for capability development and a workshop covering scanning accuracy, management strategies for triplets, EID data use was piloted. The workshop enabled co-learning and sharing of information and demonstration of techniques. The workshop was extremely well received, with participants on average valuing the workshops as 9.3/10, with 100% recommending the workshop to others and 16 reporting they are highly likely or likely to implement a change in their pregnancy scanning business to support producers.

There has been significant work done within the sheep industry to document the benefits of scanning, yet according to a national survey (Howard & Beatie 2018) only 50% of Australian sheep producers had adopted scanning, and worse still only 31% indicated that they scan for multiples. It is important if we want to increase this rate of adoption that producers have a good experience when they begin the pregnancy scanning journey.

The difficulty of lining up scanners when they aren't busy scanning, having a selection of pregnant ewes available out of traditional lambing season in a suitable location for scanners to travel to that can has the right facilities available means this is not a simple activity to run and is likely to be one of the main reasons this type of capability development has not previously been offered.

Mentoring of service providers: Market research from this project identified an aging demographic of Service Providers as a risk to Victorian livestock industries. This project provided an opportunity to upskill a new cohort of service providers as well as building the skills of existing service providers. Most of the mentoring developed capability to deliver MLA products including Profitable Grazing Systems, Building Better Breeders and Grass to Dollars. Building a stronger Service Provider network leads to increased producer adoption, profitability and productivity. One service provider was mentored to deliver Building Better Breeders and three others were mentored to deliver Grass to Dollars. This mentoring increased the capability for Profitable Grazing Systems to be delivered in Victoria and resulted in two Building Better Breeder and two Grass to Dollars packages being delivered by the Innovative networks project. Mentoring and support to develop capability in Lifetime Ewe was also provided to a veterinary practitioner.

4.3.2 Objective 3.2

This objective was about investing in building service provider capacity to service the Victorian livestock industries. Delivery against this outcome included:

- Service provider professional development, training and performance monitoring system implementation plan. Report to Agriculture Victoria (Howard et al. 2024a)
- Service provider professional development, training and performance monitoring system implementation plan, Part 2 report to Agriculture Victoria (Howard et al. 2024b)
- BWBL and BB guidelines for coordinators (Howard, undated).
- Red meat supply chain survey (Howard 2023)
- Production of State of the Sector (Internal) reports (see also objective 1.3)

Service provider professional development, training and performance monitoring aims to strengthen the capacity of BWBL/BB Network coordinators and service providers to improve delivery to the networks. As well as the need for ongoing professional development this work is particularly important given that some very experienced coordinators are likely to retire in the next three years. The significant amount of work conducted by Kristy Howard deserves acknowledgement (Howard et al. 2024a and b and Howard undated). The initial work (Howard et al. 2024a) on service provider development developed eight key recommendations around three key areas (coordinators conference, partnerships and engagement/mentoring). Part 2 (Howard et al. 2024b) provided implementation recommendations targeting skills development, knowledge sharing, and succession planning while addressing challenges like limited time and resources in three key areas: 1) Advanced facilitation training for coordinators; 2) Mentoring program for new and early-career coordinators; 3) Establishment of Community of Practice for coordinators). Key information required to move each of these stages forward (background, actions, outlines of plans, key contacts, indicative costs, supporting materials, guidelines for evaluation) is also detailed (Howard et al. 2024b). The Guidelines for coordinators (Howard, undated) are also very useful.

A red meat supply chain survey was conducted (Howard 2023) with the aim of gaining a comprehensive understanding of the challenges currently affecting red meat processors in Victoria and determine if they would like to work with Agriculture Victoria in the future, and if so, to develop an engagement plan. Thirteen meat processors were contacted.

The results from the red meat processor survey showed strong opportunities for Agriculture Victoria to work with meat processors and their supply chain partners (producers and agents/buyers) in Victoria. There were three key areas identified in the survey

1. Best practice animal management
 - a. preparation of animals for processing (issues identified include correct inoculations, use of animal health treatments, management of skins for seed, mud and dags, welfare issues and transport)
 - b. animal welfare requirements
2. Optimising carcass value
 - a. As in the point above the preparation of animals for processing results in consequences to the producer and processor. This may result in discounts, returned

consignments, euthanasia on unloading, condemned carcasses, heavy trimming and welfare breeches.

3. Carbon emissions in the supply chain

On farm carbon emissions and how it fits in supply chains.

A communication and engagement plan has been developed using these results with the intent to inform Agriculture Victoria's Meat and Wool Program on communication and engagement opportunities and priorities into the future. (AgVic 2024).

4.3.3 Objective 3.3

The intent of this objective changed with MLA agreement from what was originally envisaged, which was to have greater emphasis on the supply chain, data collected by processors and increased producer understanding of these requirements. Supply chain coordinators were to be employed within processing facilities, but this did not occur. Another key issue was that no Victorian processor is using the My Feedback program with a number of the larger processors in Victoria having developed their own programs for providing feedback to their producers. However, the project coordinated several a producer group tours of processing facilities, along with webinar on My Feedback so that producers could develop a better understanding of data-driven on-farm decisions to improve the quality and health of their livestock, in line with market requirements.

This objective therefore was adapted to better understand the competencies of the clients and groups that they service and use this to support and motivate their clients through a service offer that was tailored to their needs.

A total of 68 supply chain compliance activities were conducted, covering topics from the NLIS and use of EIDs, traceability and meeting market specifications, biosecurity planning, property movements, Grass to Dollars and animal health planning.

The following industry organisations were engaged:

- Livestock Transport Association
- Stock Agents Association
- Pregnancy Scanners
- Livestock Contractors Association
- Shearing Contractors Association

One of the positives during COVID-19 was the strong engagement with key players across the broader industry in Victoria, as Agriculture Victoria supported them to navigate lock downs and navigate approvals to continue business operations. This project played a key role in building these connections which lead to great collaborations into an extended network post COVID such as targeted workshops for the Livestock Transport Association and the Stock Agents' Association, which extended reach of the project.

Building the capability of agents **** is a model designed to increase adoption of best practice management. Agents have large networks and build strong relationships and trust and engage with the majority of beef and sheep producers. Upskilling the agents/service providers significantly expands the advisory network servicing the sheep and beef industry, that currently has limited capacity to drive adoption. A pilot agent capacity building workshop was delivered with a focus on lamb finishing and managing climate variability. The workshop was viewed by those attending as an excellent opportunity to increase their skills and support them to provide a more comprehensive service and support their producer client to make more informed decisions. The pilot identified that engaging agents has some challenges (delivery timing, length and technical topics) and would require further refining, however the outcomes would be highly valuable for the sheep and beef industries. Evaluation of the agent's workshop was highly positive achieving an average value score of 9/10, and 100% of participants would recommend to others.

There were a number of changes in direction for the pregnancy scanner deliverable. Initially the project aim was to pilot an accreditation process for pregnancy scanners. However, recommendations from the AWI and MLA funded pregnancy scanner project (L.LSM.0021) included the lack of industry support for an accreditation process and a recommendation not to pursue this direction. As an alternative it was agreed by the MLA project manager to focus on pregnancy scanner capability building.

The concept of increasing pregnancy scanner capability has long been identified as an issue (Trompf and Kubeil 2017). According to a national survey (Howard and Beattie 2018) only 50% of Australian sheep producers had adopted scanning, and only 31% indicated that they scan for multiples. In this project a pilot workshop was delivered with scanners with a focus on scanning for triplets and using electronic identification (EID) tags. Nineteen scanners attended the day, with a mix of experience from 3 years scanning through to 28 years. The service providers who attended pregnancy scan just under 3 million ewes annually, with only a minority of those ewes being scanned for triplets and EID also being infrequently used. The workshop feedback from the scanners engaged was very positive and included that the workshop's value was 9.3/10, all would recommend it to others and 84% of scanners were likely to make a change as a result of the workshop. Scanner feedback also highlighted the lack of opportunity for capability building within their industry. Attendees were extremely supportive of further training opportunities and collaboration to increase the adoption of best practice scanning and reproductive management.

A Knowledge, attitude, skills and aspirations (KASA) Tracker (Pinion Advisory 2024a, b) was a key output from this objective. This has been packaged into a set of tools and resource under the name 'Skills Muster'. The concept was to develop a framework for group coordinators to assess and track individuals within their groups. Separate versions were developed for group members users and coordinators. It was successfully piloted with three groups and took 45-60 minutes to complete. Key features that Skills Muster aims to achieve are: 1) Be simple to use, including offline access; 2) Support group members to identify and prioritise topic areas to inform professional development planning; 3) Monitor/track changes in skills and knowledge; 4) Collate data from groups to a

**** The original deliverable for the project was to deliver a graduate program. It was subsequently agreed with the MLA project manager to change this deliverable to increase the scope of the service provider capability building and focus on agent capability building.

Network level to enable measurement of increased skills and knowledge (impact) attributable to participation in the Networks; 5) Support groups to identify and prioritise topic areas to inform annual group activity planning; 6) Collate data to enable reporting of groups change in skills and knowledge demonstrating benefits of group membership during strategic reviews. The KASA Tracker tool takes producers through a process of rating (1-10 scoring system) themselves across a range of learning areas:

- Breeding and selection
- Pasture, feedbase and plant nutrition
- Animal health, welfare and nutrition
- Natural resources and climate
- Business management
- Managing yourself and your team
- Value chains and marketing

The three groups that piloted this new tool had confidence it would increase the ability of Network group coordinators to facilitate targeted and tailored programs to enhance practice change. The group coordinators (even despite some initial scepticism) felt that the KASA Tracker was very useful and have recommend for future use across the network. Evaluation feedback was extremely positive with producers ranking it 4.2/5 in terms of potential to add value to their business, 4.4/5 regarding adding value to the group and 9/10 for willingness to keep using it within groups (Pinion Advisory 2024a). Skills Muster overview document for workshop use is attached as Appendix 5.

4.4 Formal evaluation

Full results of the formal evaluation have been presented in a report previously (Lannin et al. 2024). Summary comments are provided in Table 11 below and the headline key impacts included:

- 66% of producers involved have implemented and seen positive changes in their farm business.
- 63% of producers involved have an increased understanding of production targets and are now managing their farm to achieve them.
- 58% of producers involved agree they have an increased understanding of the key profit drivers and risk through benchmarking and are now managing their farm to achieve them.
- 57% of producers involved agree that their understanding of markets to maximise returns has increased.
- Participating producers noted that the effectiveness of their coordinator to provide support to their local group had increased.

Table 11. Summary comments on formal evaluation (Lannin et al. 2024).

Key evaluation question	Outcome	Summary comments on evaluation
1a) To what extent has the efficiency of the network increased?	1	Group coordinators (GCs) have better tools on hand to help run groups which help to make them more efficient. GCs are effective at supporting producers, but it is harder to report changes over time.

1b) To what extent did the network engage new and existing producers?	1	<p>GCs recognise the value the Network provides in terms of learning new approaches and building social connection in an industry which can be very isolating.</p> <p>GCs advocate for the value of the Network which helps to attract new members.</p> <p>Producers value the network (opportunity to learn, share and connect) and will advocate for others to join.</p> <p>Producers willingly invite new producers to the Network based on their experience.</p>
2) To what extent did the program increase the capacity and capability of service providers to support producers	3	<p>GCs attend the coordinator conferences and most speak positively about what is delivered and the networking opportunities. This includes being provided with facilitation tools to run the groups more effectively.</p> <p>Service providers (SPs), GCs and industry groups collaborate and share information particularly through the coordinator conference.</p> <p>The SharePoint offers a centralised platform for tools and resources which help GCs operate and the annual planning and review helps to ensure service delivery meets the needs of producers.</p> <p>SPs being up to date with new/current managements practices & technologies/ tools relies on the expertise of the SP.</p> <p>There is less opportunity for SPs only resources and development, more ad-hoc opportunities. The options are less available, or don't stretch SPs enough.</p> <p>The Network conferences offer valuable opportunities to connect, however existing industry networks are stronger than supplied through the network for SPs.</p> <p>SPs want to understand what the tools are and how to use them.</p> <p>More training opportunities and PD for GCs & SPs.</p> <p>There is an appetite for better connection across Network groups to share information.</p> <p>SP effectiveness is not entirely attributed to the network.</p>
3) To what extent did producers implement new management practices and technologies?	2	<p>Lots of examples of implementation and this is seen as a strength of the Network. However, there is some confusion around what the Network contributes versus other programs that run in parallel.</p> <p>There is increased producer awareness of Ag Vic and MLA tools and products, more so understood by GCs & SPs than producers, but to varying degrees.</p> <p>There is need to upskill GCs & SPs on these tools to increase producer awareness.</p> <p>All producers were motivated and empowered to implement new practices, but this takes time and benefits from learning from others who have implemented already.</p> <p>The extent depends on the producer and what they want from the network, some are there more to meet their social needs.</p> <p>Re. increased production and financial benchmarking some have done it but are waiting to see changes over time. Others didn't feel the benchmark measures were relevant to them based on their size – they see more value in 'like for like' comparisons.</p>

		<p>Others do benchmarking outside the group and get more out of other groups.</p> <p>Lots of examples of adoption, but it takes time and isn't as simple as a learn and adopt process. Relies on having evidence of successful outcomes through real life statistics or others adopting and reporting back about outcomes.</p> <p>Regarding increased effectiveness of enterprise management, there were stories of very positive impacts, but it is hard to attribute increased effectiveness entirely to the project due to external influences.</p> <p>Producers provided examples of approaches which are more effective based on changes through the network e.g. pasture improvements, production rates etc.</p>
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4.5 Internal evaluation workshop

An internal evaluation workshop (refer section 3.5 in the methods) identified the following 10 key project successes:

1. The ability to trial new ways of delivery.
2. Introduction of topic-based groups.
3. The increased scope of activities offered through the Network.
4. Legacy project where relationships with industry were built and maintained and can be leveraged to further support livestock producers.
5. Professional development opportunities for group coordinators through mentoring and the delivery of the coordinator professional development plan.
6. Groups had access to quality, international speakers.
7. Development of the KASA Tracker.
8. Extending reach of activities and services to broader network of producers and groups.
9. Increased efficiencies and effectiveness of the BWBL and BB network operations
10. Ability to support livestock producers with targeted activities in response to emergencies such as COVID-19, flood, fire and EAD.

4.6 Case studies

Summary impacts of 11 case studies conducted in this project shown in Table 12. Full details are reported in Anon. (undated).

Table 12. Summary comments on impacts of case studies (Anon, undated).

Case study	Objectives	Impact
KASA tracker	1.1 and 3.3	Successful tool for group coordinators to use at initial activity planning meeting and again bi-annually to determine changes in KASA in future.
Internal project management improvement	1.1-1.3	Improved reports, better internal communication leading to more efficient network operation.

Coordinators handbook and group planning template	1.2-1.3	Provides clarity about roles and responsibilities for new (and existing) group coordinators and will lead to a more consistent annual plan between groups. Improved consistency for coordinator succession.
Raising the Baa	2.1	Improved flock management practices adopted.
Pregnancy scanner workshop	3.1	Improved knowledge and confidence of scanners in scanning for multiples and use of EID, sharing of knowledge, comparing equipment, excellent networking.
Livestock farm monitor	2.1	28 new farmers involved. Improved financial recording and benchmarking. Farmers much more aware of costs, increased their business understanding, builds resilience and improves their ability to adapt to change.
Carbon calculator	2.2	Provides the producers with a platform to start their emissions journey. Understanding terminology and making them aware of their data empowers them to consider options as they become available
Rabobank Hamilton tour	2.1	Tour enabled more created critical thinking and re-assessment of business plan, improved trust of group members and data recording improvement
T90	2.1	Improved knowledge and confidence in the importance of the role of condition scoring in reproductive performance.
Grass to dollars -service provider capacity building	3.1	Two way learning and increased capability of mentor and mentee, improved professional reputation.
BWBL and BB coordinators conference	3.1	Improved knowledge of tools, resources and networks overall improved capacity of service providers.

5 Conclusion

5.1 Key findings

Outcome 1: A more innovative and coordinated Victorian sheep and beef network that is managing the delivery of highly valued products and services

MLA support for this project has strengthened and expanded the existing BWBL and BB Network. The network remains the most nationally recognised and integrated extension and information service for livestock producers and an excellent platform for engaging with producers.

The investment has also supported a broader network of existing producer and industry led groups and strengthened collaboration between them, resulting in a more strategic and coordinated approach to services offered. New models and innovations were developed for engaging and supporting producers to understand and adopt best practice management. These were targeted to producer segments, considering geographic and demographic differences. The tailored services, including the promotion and use of MLA tools and resources, and group-directed learning activities offered by experienced local coordinators has successfully maintained momentum in the network and grown the membership.

With the evolution of artificial intelligence generative models resources that are available should be developed into webpages to make them more discoverable and ensure that content is incorporated into generated responses. Group coordinators report that the extent to which tools are used varies greatly and some of them are likely to ‘die on the vine’ through limited awareness and training opportunities. The aversion of livestock producers to paying for tools is also likely to be a factor in limited uptake of some tools.

Success of the project is demonstrated through the additional 2,778 participating producers and an additional 3,837 network members. Livestock producers continue to value the network and can see positive changes in their farm business from participating in a group learning environment which is targeted to producers’ capacity, age and stage of business development and drivers.

Practices that improve profitability and/or ease of management remain most attractive for producer adoption. However, there remains a very important role for government in information provision and practice adoption in enhanced biosecurity, emergency response, animal welfare, environmental protection, building resilience to climate change and supply chain compliance. Agriculture Victoria remains a valued and trusted source of information, particularly in these less immediately profit driven and more public benefits areas. Agriculture Victoria needs to continue to balance the needs of producers by offering tailored services in public benefits and compliance areas as well as complementing private sector service providers.

The Blueprint work (Hickey and Trompf, 2025) conducted in this project also provides strategic direction for the industry in Victoria. State of the Sector reports were also important, with knowledge fed into Southern Australian Livestock Research Council, policy advisors and other decision makers.

Outcome 2: Producers are measuring, monitoring and managing key profit drivers and risks, and implementing the technologies and management practices to improve business performance.

The lack of measure to manage approaches on farm continues to be a barrier to best practice adoption for livestock producers. To overcome this, a pathway was developed to engage producers in simple measurement activities for more complex practices:

- Introductory measure to manage products started with simple and practical concepts (e.g. worm egg counts) that resulted in clear decisions that had economic and time saving benefits.
- Intermediate products included ‘hitting the grid’ to understand market specifications and ‘know your number’ which helps producers to understand sources of carbon emissions.
- High level products with full business analysis included Livestock Farm Monitor.

Producers got excited about knowing and understanding data to make informed decisions tailored to their farm and could see many benefits over the use of a traditional practice or ‘rules of thumb’. The approach generated interest in more measurements, leading to a pattern of collecting more data to make change.

A very important role for Agriculture Victoria is also to improve producer knowledge and preparedness to respond to challenges and disruptions. Through this project, workshops were designed and delivered to support producers to increase biosecurity on farm, by improving understanding, skills and confidence to implement traceability and biosecurity systems. Due to

COVID 19, delivery shifted online which attracted a significant number of producers not previously engaged and led to an improved design of online workshops. Webinars were also delivered to transporters and processors building awareness across the sector of the heightened risk of FMD.

Measuring and monitoring activities were conducted with 65 existing network groups, usually covering 6 sessions per year per group on topics of interest to the group. Producers contribute a membership fee which is a proportion of the \$2,000 group charge divided by the number of members.

The ongoing nature of these groups supports increased adoption as opposed to single events, due largely to the significance of peer-to-peer learning through the development of trust. The innovative networks project expanded its reach by delivering activities through other networks such as Landcare groups, meat processors, service providers such as livestock agents, pregnancy scanners, shearers, livestock transporters, and producer groups^{****}.

Additional financial benchmarking was completed on 30 farms using Livestock Farm Monitor methods which provided an important basis for group discussions. Many other activities around 'Measure to Manage' were implemented which resulted in increased awareness, record keeping, benchmarking and improved business management. Workshops included:

- "Foundations of Success" financial business benchmarking workshops (12 groups, 150 producers)
- "Measure to manage" production benchmarking (12 groups, 150 producers)
- "Cost of Production" (12 groups, 150 producers)
- "Hitting the grid" (12 groups, 150 enterprises)
- "Know your number" (farm emissions calculator) (10 groups, 100 enterprises)

Technologies and innovations were demonstrated at workshops, field days and tours such as; pregnancy scanning for sheep, AgTech (tours and workshops), 'risk and records' on farm workshops, farmer groups visits to processors, promotion of MyFeedBack, Profitable Grazing Systems workshops, small landholder booklets and fixed term, topic based groups. A networks conference was held annually, along with one pilot 'roadshow' with guest speakers encouraging 'measure to monitor' practices.

Overall, the activities conducted during this project have increased measuring, monitoring and management of key profit drivers and risks, and adoption of the technologies and practices that improve business performance. However, the pressure to improve continues and several challenges remain. These include use of technology amongst older producers as well as an aversion of many livestock producers to pay for additional products and services (partly on the basis that they believe producer levies have already paid for such development and partly because livestock producers are less inclined to pay for personalised services than cropping farmers).

Improved engagement with processors was only partly achieved, as supply chain co-ordinators were not put in place in Victoria, largely a result of COVID-19. Opportunities to improve the quality of livestock presented for processing were identified throughout the project and will help inform future

^{****} E.g. Perennial Pasture Systems, Southern Farming Systems, Gippsland Agricultural Group.

extension work with a focus on animal health and welfare management, optimising carcass value and carbon emissions in the supply chain.

Outcome 3: Service providers are motivating and supporting producers to implement the technologies and management practices required to improve their business performance

Capability development of service providers, within and beyond the BWBL and BB networks was an important outcome of the project. Coordinators of the BWBL and BB groups (both from the private sector and Agriculture Victoria) were the largest group of service providers in this project and were supported in a range of activities^{****}. In addition, substantial progress has been made in developing relationships with, and building of capability of pregnancy scanners, livestock agents and livestock transporters. These service providers have large networks which enables reach well beyond the producers Agriculture Victoria has contact with.

A particular success was work conducted with pregnancy scanners to increase service capabilities in scanning for triplets. The increasing prevalence of triplet bearing ewes (due to more composite and cross bred ewes and the application of lifetime ewe principles leading to higher conception rates for triplets) presented an opportunity to pilot engagement with scanners^{§§§§}. The pregnancy scanners this project worked with scan three million ewes per year and reach many livestock producers not currently serviced by Agriculture Victoria. The workshop covered scanning accuracy, management strategies for triplets and improved use of electronic identification data use. Excellent relationships were developed, and the workshops improved the capability of scanners, with significant benefits to industry. Developing relationships with and building capability of livestock agents and other service providers proved a constructive way to help engage producers who are not traditional users of Agriculture Victoria and MLA products and services.

Mentoring service providers also contributed to this outcome. There is recognition of the need for ongoing professional development and mentoring for service providers, particularly given that some very experienced coordinators in both the private sector and Agriculture Victoria are likely to retire in the next three years. This project provided an opportunity to upskill a new cohort of Service Providers as well as building the skills of existing service providers. Most of the mentoring focussed on capability to deliver MLA products including Profitable Grazing Systems (Building Better Breeders and Grass to Dollars). Strengthening the Service Provider network leads to increased producer adoption, profitability and productivity.

The project highlighted that there are substantial challenges regarding engagement of livestock processors and their use of market specification data/tools in Victoria. There is opportunity for Agriculture Victoria to engage and work with meat processors and their producers/agents in Victoria around issues they are experiencing with the quality of livestock presented for slaughter that are not currently being addressed in existing extension programs.

^{****} These included: Mentoring for new service providers to develop skills in delivering MLA products; Training in livestock farm monitor delivery; Networking opportunities through annual conferences and farm tours; Work in Service Provider Professional Development, Training and Performance Monitoring System; Guidelines for group coordinators to help them understand client needs; Development and piloting of a KASA tracker; Tools and resources catalogue re tools producers could tap into and where it might be beneficial.

^{§§§§} Many scanners are not confident to offer a service for triplet scanning and in addition producers have had bad experiences with scanning and some have discontinued scanning as a result.

5.2 Benefits to industry

There has been significant benefit for producers and the broader industry from improved collaboration between MLA and Agriculture Victoria. Broadening the networks beyond BWBL and BB and within Victorian livestock industry and across the supply chain (meat processors, livestock transporters, saleyard operators, agents' association, Landcare networks, and other farmer networks *****) is a legacy of the project that will continue to benefit the industry. Through links and relationships that have been fostered, we continue to see greater collaboration and an increased the profile and presence of MLA. The project has brought about more efficient and coordinated services to the livestock industry. Another benefit capitalised on is the increased intelligence used to inform policy development on variety of issues.

The benefits to the Victorian livestock industry from the Innovative Sheep and Beef Networks project can be summarised as:

- Improved knowledge and decision-making for existing and new producer entrants to the networks: Peer-based learning and support fostered in groups are key enablers of producers' decisions to implement practice changes that drive productivity growth and farm profits.
- Multiple benefits to producers from practice change: Up to 96% of group members have implemented practice changes as a direct result of being involved in BWBL and BB groups. Benefits identified by farmers in the network from practice change adoption have previously been identified by Beattie and Howard (2014) and include increased production and income, ease of management, reduced costs, greater management timeliness, more management control/less stress and other benefits such as better recording and livestock tracking.
- Economic benefits to industry: Previous evaluation work has found that the BB Network project returned a benefit cost ratio of \$7 for every dollar invested (Beattie and Howard 2014). The BB Network has previously been evaluated to increase farm profitability by \$64 million (\$16 million/year) based on an average of \$5100 increase in annual profitability where a change is implemented on farm (Beattie & Howard 2014). The BWBL project has previously returned a conservative benefit cost ratio of \$3.8 for every dollar invested (reported by Hickey and Trompf 2025). While a benefit:cost analysis was not conducted for this project, additional farm practice adoption that has occurred through this project would be expected to generate BCR values to industry greater than 1.
- Improved well-being: Farmers put a high value on the social and mental health and well-being benefits of participating in network activities. Farmers have greater confidence, feel more in control and less stressed when faced with decision making and implementing changes, reduced isolation, receive greater support during times of high stress and have a better work/life balance.
- Improved connections, knowledge sharing and development with private service providers: This includes significant opportunities to develop partnerships and relationships with livestock agents and service providers such as pregnancy scanners and vets who have not previously been heavily engaged with Agriculture Victoria and the BWBL and BB networks.

*****) such as Gippsland Ag Group, Perennial Pasture Systems and Southern Farming Systems.

- Greater connections with processors: The project highlighted that the linkages between processors and Agriculture Victoria, MLA and producers could be improved. Doing so could improve economic benefits to producers, processors and the industry as a whole, particularly through improvements in meeting market specifications and use of available tools and resources to do so.

The Innovative Sheep and Beef project, through the co-investment from MLA through MDC, AWI and the Victorian governments to support the BWBL and BB networks provides a template for industry and government co-invest in an environment of overall diminishing public sector services and an ageing extension provider network.

6 Future research and recommendations

The key recommendations, to benefit the Victorian livestock industry, are based on continued collaboration between AgVic and MLA. Use of the existing and new tools and processes available and continuing investment in innovative delivery methods that meet the changing needs of beef and sheep producers: and for the continuation of targeted professional development programs for group coordinators and a range of service providers such as general livestock advisors. Specific recommendations include:

1. Continued investment in the BWBL and BB networks to build on the tools and processes available and range of innovative delivery methods that meet the changing needs of beef and sheep producers. In particular:
 - Implement the strategies outlined in the Network Blueprint (Hickey and Trompf, 2025) and piloted in the Innovative Network project to engage the next tier of producers by partnering with livestock agents.
 - Implement Service Provider Professional Development, Training and Performance Monitoring System (Howard, 2024 a, b) including the establishment of a targeted professional development program for group coordinators and general livestock advisors with paid upskilling and group facilitation mentoring.
 - Target services for different market segments, including new red meat producers, part-time farmers and young producers. Consideration could be given to innovative ways to attract younger producers, for example, provide support and design events to suit primary carers to attract young farming families to activities (eg childcare).
 - Implement identified mechanisms to overcome adoption barriers including expanding the use of fixed term topic-based groups and the measure to manage learning continuum.
 - Offer additional training and mentoring to support the capability development of new coordinators.
 - Continue use of the KASA Tracker which was piloted and trialled by three Network groups to set and monitor learning objectives for individuals and within groups.
 - Continue improving the current session evaluation, group planning and internal reporting processes.
 - Ensure products, tools and resources are developed into webpages to make them more discoverable for AI generated responses.
 - Consideration of whether some hardcopy communication vehicles (such as SheepNotes⁺⁺⁺⁺) should be continued.

⁺⁺⁺⁺ From Wilkinson and Schelfhorst (2024). Is there still a place for SheepNotes? There are two important items for Agriculture Victoria in the analysis. One is that livestock producers who think positively of Agriculture Victoria are still highly likely to read information from Agriculture Victoria, and even those who think negatively or neutrally of Agriculture Victoria are more likely than not to read some kinds of information from Agriculture Victoria. The other is that any form of reasonable useful communication with livestock producers by Agriculture Victoria (such as SheepNotes) helps to maintain a positive relationship between livestock producers and Agriculture Victoria. Such a positive relationship would be invaluable in the event of a livestock biosecurity emergency. Although the direct benefits of producing information such as SheepNotes may not outweigh the costs, Agriculture Victoria needs to consider whether the indirect benefits are worth the cost.

2. Continued professional development support that is tailored for industry associations, such as the Stock Agents, Pregnancy Scanners, and Livestock Contractors, to better support livestock producer decision making and adoption
3. Enhance models to better utilise gathered intelligence for informed decision making, for example with MLA adoption and R&D managers.
4. Develop better connections between the networks and processors. The project highlighted that the linkages between processors and Agriculture Victoria, MLA and producers could be improved. Increasing connections between processors and the networks would support an increase in producers meeting market specifications and using the available tools and resources to support decision making.
5. Implement the processor communication and engagement plan to inform opportunities and priorities into the future (AgVic 2024).
6. Continue partnerships and projects that utilise the benefits of the established network to innovate, adopt practices and new technologies e.g. PDS.

7 References

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8 Appendices

8.1 Appendix 1:

MDC Innovative Sheep and Beef Networks Project Monitoring, Evaluation and Reporting (MER) Plan.



MDC Innovative
Networks MER Plan

8.2 Appendix 2

Lannin, D., Downer, N. and Detoya, P. (2024). Innovative sheep and beef networks. Impact Assessment Report. (AgInnovate and Verian Group Report to Agriculture Victoria).



Impact Evaluation

8.3 Appendix 3

Blueprint for the Victorian sheep and beef networks (Hickey and Trompf, 2025)



Victorian Networks
Blueprint.docx

8.4 Appendix 4

Skills Muster – Overview for producer workshops



'skills muster' session
overview slides_for w

8.5 Appendix 5

Providing information to Victorian livestock farmers. Roger Wilkinson Erica Schelfhorst, 2024



SVBS Final
Report.docx

8.6 Appendix 6

Network Case Studies



MDC Innovative
Networks Case Stud