

Showcasing innovative practices - Australian Pastoral Property Innovation Manual

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Keywords: Bestprac, innovation, network

Abstract

Innovations have been an important part of agriculture in Australia, being developed by necessity to provide unique ways of simplifying tasks, saving time or improving effectiveness. Innovators often don't realise the potential value of their ideas to other producers. Hence innovations often get "trapped" and only used by the innovator business. It was this observation that led to the development of the *Australian Pastoral Property Innovation Manual*. The purpose of the manual was to profile the innovative practices of rangeland producers. For this to happen, producers had to be invited to contribute ideas. This was achieved during 2009 by contacting producers involved in the network of Bestprac groups and pastoral producer networks around Australia. The *Australian Pastoral Property Innovation Manual* is a compilation of 120 innovations from pastoral businesses in SA, Qld, NSW and WA. The process of gathering, documenting and sharing innovations has had a significant effect on the producers involved in the project. One of the significant learnings came when producers realised that many of the practices that they took for granted were actually very innovative. They were also surprised to learn that many others were not undertaking these ideas that they accepted as commonplace. The sharing of these innovations has led to increased adoption of innovation from within the pastoral industry and even implementation of innovations from other industries. This paper will explore the concept of pastoral innovation and highlight how the development of the *Australian Pastoral Property Innovation Manual* has assisted with the ongoing improvement of pastoral businesses connected to the Bestprac network.

Introduction

Bestprac is a program that provides support and coaches pastoral wool, sheep meat and cattle producers to improve their business and production performance. Typically Bestprac groups participate in a combination of workshops, field days, research trials or study tours. But Bestprac is “more than just group meetings”; it is about networking, social support and motivation in an often harsh and isolating environment. The specific Bestprac approach has empowered groups and individuals to innovate, remain in the industry and contribute to their communities.

Bestprac groups operate in Queensland, New South Wales, South Australia and Western Australia. A total of 16 groups (approximately 150 participants) can be found in the rangelands zone in these states. Many of these groups have been operating for ten years or longer. Bestprac has been fortunate to receive continued support from Australian Wool Innovation Limited (AWI) throughout the project life. AWI provides valuable funds for the support and coordination of this network. The majority of project funds for the development of the *Australian Pastoral Property Innovation Manual* were provided by DAFF through the Caring for Our Country program. Additional in-kind support was also provided by AWI.

During 2009, the national Bestprac network and a network of pastoral producers cooperated to develop the *Australian Pastoral Property Innovation Manual*. The manual compiled 120 innovations from pastoral businesses in SA, Qld, NSW and WA. The process of gathering, documenting and sharing innovations has had a significant effect on the producers involved in the project.

The Bestprac network was seen as a logical source of innovation. For many years individual group members have been discussing, observing and refining innovations. The purpose of this project was to harvest innovations across the whole network and present these in a way that is accessible to all Bestprac members and the wider pastoral industry.

The bestprac program

The Bestprac program is based on the Continuous Improvement and Innovation (CI&I) cycle, see Fig.1 below. This cycle is a proven technique to improve the rate of adoption of new information and innovation. The process focuses on identification of areas for improvement, action planning, regular reviews to maintain focus, project implementation and celebrating successes. To ensure maximum success, groups make contact every 90 days, either face to face or via teleconferences. The implementation of the CI&I process within Bestprac allows for continued development and innovation within and between the businesses involved.

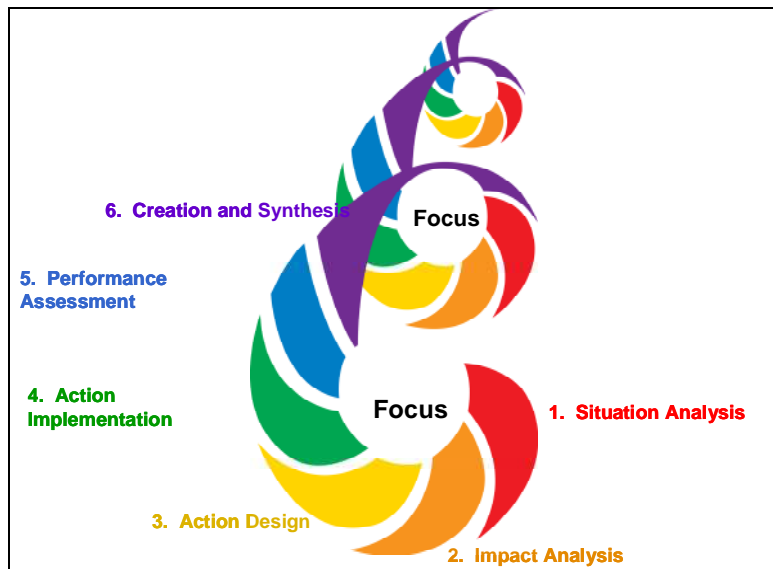


Fig. 1. CI&I Process, R Clarke and J Timms, QDPI

As Bestprac has been operating for over ten years in some regions; there was a need to reenergise the CI&I cycle. By encouraging Bestprac members to identify and analyse innovations, a renewed innovation focus was established. A crucial component to this process was determining a definition of what is an innovation. Guidelines were developed to assist in determining what an innovation is. The key point communicated to producers was that an

innovation could be a new use for an existing product or even a new business model; it didn't need to be an invention.

What is an innovation?

To assist in the collation of innovations for the *Australian Pastoral Property Innovation Manual* the following criteria were used to define an innovation:

- New products
- New uses for existing products
- New materials for existing products
- New processes
- New business models
- New distribution systems
- New sources of supply
- New supply chain relationships

Innovations were considered to be ideas, tools, machines and practices that:

- Drive growth
- Improve standards of safety
- Enhance quality
- Create better outcomes for the environment
- Increase productivity
- Increase efficiency

With these definitions in mind, producers were then asked to review their businesses and other businesses in their area to determine what innovations existed.

Why do pastoralists innovate?

Managing sheep meat and wool businesses in a pastoral environment can be challenging and rewarding. Typical challenges include:

- Managing variable weather (normally varying degrees of dryness)
- Matching feed requirements of livestock with feed that is available
- Sourcing, motivating and retaining employees and contractors
- Efficiently and effectively managing livestock so all tasks are productive and enjoyable
- Growing the business so it remains competitive, sustainable and ahead of declining terms of trade
- Working in isolation, this means there is not a natural flow of ideas between producers

An effective way to manage all these issues is to have an innovative culture within the business. An innovative culture involves looking at all business operations, policies and practices and asking the question “How can this practice be done differently so it is cheaper, easier to do, quicker, safer, more productive or makes more money?” Adopting a new practice always has an element of risk, so gaining insights from producers about what has worked and more importantly not worked is critical to developing a competitive pastoral sheep meat and wool industry. The *Australian Pastoral Property Innovation Manual* provided the mechanism for sharing of innovation.

Process of gathering innovation

All Bestprac regions within the network contributed to the manual. Innovations were gathered through face-to-face group meetings, forums, road trips to other properties and individual innovation documentation property visits.

Face to face group meetings were used to brainstorm innovations that have been implemented on-farm and then determine which would be documented for the manual. This process was highly beneficial for producers as it provided recognition that their practices were innovative.

A national innovation forum was held in Dubbo, NSW. This forum brought together producers and industry stakeholders to profile latest innovations and key contributors to the manual. This was a highly successful event.

Road trips were a new concept for this project. Producer groups travelled to other properties within their state and even into other states. These trips were an opportunity to see what others were achieving and brainstorm ways the innovations could be applied back on their properties. These were also very successful because of the new information gained and the opportunity to look outside of their local districts. Bestprac groups are now planning more road trips in the future.

Individuals also visited properties that were known to be innovative to document innovations directly for the manual.

The scope of innovations gathered

A total of 120 innovations were provided and documented for the manual. The following list of headings provides some indication of the range of innovations that were documented. The number of innovations gathered in each of the sections is shown in Fig.2.

Business Management and Administration Innovations:

- Corporate Governance
- Record Keeping
- Monitoring and Evaluation

Business Diversification Innovations:

- On-Farm Enterprises
- Off-Farm Enterprises

Production Innovations:

- Measuring Livestock Performance
- Water management
- Feedlots and Droughtlots

- Supplementary Feeding
- Fox and Wild Dog Control

Environmental Innovations:

- Grazing Systems
- Cropping Systems
- Weed Management
- Managing Ground Cover and Encouraging Regeneration
- Managing Grazing Pressure

Infrastructure and Equipment Innovations:

- Livestock Infrastructure
- Paddock Infrastructure
- Water Infrastructure and Equipment
- Fencing Equipment
- Livestock Equipment
- Cropping Equipment
- Infrastructure and Equipment to Improve Safety

People Innovations:

- Looking after the people
- Labour resourcing
- Training and development

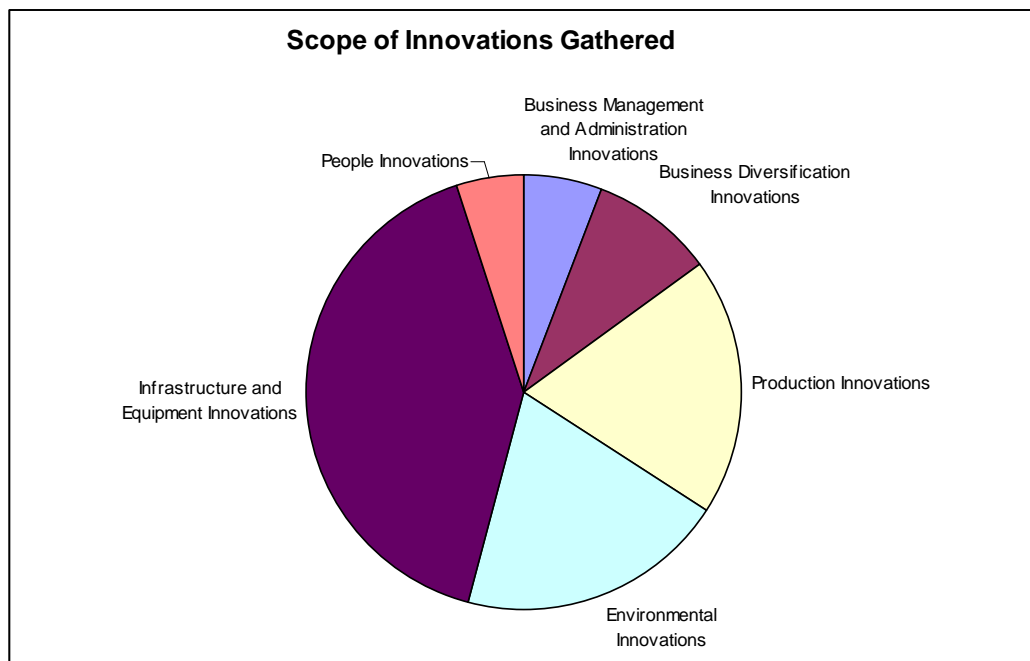


Fig.2. Innovations gathered in each section

Benefits for pastoral producers

The key benefits for producers from involvement in the gathering, documenting and reviewing innovations were:

- Motivation at a time when seasonal conditions continued to be poor in many parts of Australia. Realisation that producers can develop and adapt innovations regardless of the season. In many cases, the innovation was low cost which reduces the barriers to adoption.
- Provided a positive focus away from drought and low production issues.
- Networking and interaction provided the opportunity for groups to engage with producers in other parts of their state as well as from other states.
- Acknowledgement that “my idea is a good one” and the positive boost in morale/self esteem that is associated with this. Seeing their innovation in print was a key part of this process.
- Provided a new focus for ongoing CI&I projects and development within Bestprac groups.

- The manual is a reference book for Bestprac producers and the wider industry.

Acknowledgements

A big thank you goes to all producers who contributed their innovative ideas to the manual. This is a fantastic resource that wouldn't have been possible without their contribution. Thank you also to the individuals that gathered and clearly documented innovations ready for the manual.

Order forms for the manual available from www.bestprac.info or 08 8842 1103

Squires, J. and Sherriff, C. (2010). Showcasing innovative practices - Australian Pastoral Property Innovation Manual. In: *Proceedings of the 16th Biennial Conference of the Australian Rangeland Society*, Bourke (Eds D.J. Eldridge and C. Waters) (Australian Rangeland Society: Perth).