

# Grower Group Alliance

## Business Models of Grower Groups

A collection of case studies

# About the GGA

## Contact Details:

Rebecca Wallis – Project Leader  
M: 0400 681 054, E: rwallis@gga.org.au

Tom Lamond – Project Officer  
M: 0447 029 127, E: tlamond@gga.org.au



The Grower Group Alliance (GGA) is a non-profit, farmer driven organisation connecting grower groups, research organisations and agribusiness in networks across Western Australia.

The Grower Group Alliance project was developed in 2002 by grower groups and is managed by an advisory committee with representation from grower groups, research organisations and private agribusiness. It was fully funded by the Grains Research and Development Corporation (GRDC) for the first 12 years of operation. In April 2014, funding commenced by the Department of Agriculture and Food WA (DAFWA). The GGA is now funded through the agricultural sciences research and development fund, an initiative that is part of the State Governments 300 million dollar Seizing The Opportunity agricultural policy, made possible through the Royalties For Regions Program.

The GGA acts to support effective, relevant and sustainable grower groups with expanded operational and networking capacity and greater involvement in collaborative RD&E projects with other grower groups, industry partners and wider research community.

The role of the GGA is to;

- Support and maintain a relevant network of grower groups and their partners to allow the exchange and application of knowledge and research results.
- Enhance the participation of grower groups in delivering research, development and extension through independent and collaborative projects.
- Support grower groups in becoming more relevant, sustainable and effective as a group.

Grower groups in the GGA network are independent, self-directed, and predominately comprised of broadacre grain and livestock enterprises. They are community based groups of farmers who focus on production and environmental issues at a local and regional level.

There are currently 42 groups within the GGA network and are located throughout the WA grain production zone from Binu in the north, Bodallin in the east, and Esperance in the south east of the state.

## About the case studies

As part of the role in supporting groups to become more relevant, sustainable and effective, the GGA has developed case studies to understand the key drivers of grower groups across Australia, and to highlight how they differ in size, structure and member engagement.

The aim of the book is to provide grower groups and industry with an insight into how these organisations formed and how they are now run to deliver benefits to their grower members. It's hoped other groups will identify what has worked well or not so well, and use the new knowledge to consider improvements to their own group operations.

The GGA undertook interviews with groups across WA to inform the case studies, as well as feeding in the learnings from the Executive Officer study tour through Victoria and South Australia. Each group that participated in the tour submitted a case study on their group, along with the Victorian groups visited on the tour. The case study book highlights 11 different groups.

The Grower Group Alliance would like to acknowledge groups who contributed case studies and photographs to this publication.

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# Birchip Cropping Group Inc.

## Contact Details:

Chris Sounness,  
T: (03) 5492 2787, E: [chris@bcg.org.au](mailto:chris@bcg.org.au)



## Birchip Cropping Group Fact File:

- Membership: 430 farming businesses
- A further 20 corporate partners
- The group employees around 20 FTE
- The group has an board of ten directors
- 100 research trials sown across 20 sites
- 5% of BCG's income comes from sponsorship
- 5% of BCG 's income comes from membership
- Up to 85% of BCG 's income comes from project funding (however this can vary)
- 5% of BCG 's income comes from other opportunities



## Background & History

Birchip Cropping Group Inc. (BCG) is a not-for-profit agricultural research and extension organisation led by farmers from the Wimmera and Mallee regions of Victoria; an area expanding a 200km radius around Birchip.

BCG was established by a group of dynamic farmers in 1992. Their motivation was to conduct localised and relevant research that would answer key agronomic questions and support them to adopt new practices and improve the productivity and profitability of their farms, in turn, improving the prosperity of their local communities.

The venture proved successful with BCG today boasting 430 members, 20 corporate partners and 20 full-time equivalent staff members who annually oversee more than 100 research trials sown across 20 sites as well as five major events and numerous other communication and extension activities.

## Board Structure

As the organisation has expanded from a one-two person operation, to the more corporate-like organisation it is today, managed by a Board comprising 10 directors (six farmers and four co-opted specialists), BCG has met the challenge of remaining 'farmer-driven' through the establishment of three regional-specific farmer advisory committees. These committees are charged with the task of bringing their paddock issues, potential research questions and ideas for extension activities or improvements they'd like to see to current events to BCG.

## Activities & Events

Some of the work undertaken by BCG includes:

- Agronomic and farming systems research and development – predominantly field-based research trials and demonstrations focused on crop varieties, weed control, agronomic practices, disease management, crop nutrition, systems based crop sequences and livestock.
- Climate research – both climate variability and climate change are addressed by a number of projects with scientific and practical components.
- Social research and development – understanding that agriculture is more than production and economics, BCG has investigated some of the social aspects of living and working in rural areas and an industry susceptible to the vagaries of climate and market volatility.

- Livestock research – recent projects have investigated grazing crops, pasture production and improving the efficiency of meat production. BCG also co-ordinates four BESTWOOL/BESTLAMB groups and hosts an annual livestock field day for graziers and mixed livestock/cropping farmers.
- Yield Prophet®
- BCG Trials Review – a members-only event where the previous year's research results are presented.
- BCG Future Farmers Expo (formerly the Grains Research Expo) – held in July to showcase the latest farm business strategies and farm technology innovations as well as industry exhibits.
- BCG Industry Field Day – held in later winter/early spring, this event is designed specifically for the advisory sector to learn about the latest seed, chemical and fertiliser technologies and applications from private research and development trials (carried out through BCG's contract services).
- BCG Main Field Day

BCG's extension model is built upon a desire to share both successes and failures. BCG has embraced multiple platforms for delivering information to growers including large and small events, discussion groups, field walks, social media, video and audio and both digital and traditional communications.

## Staffing Model

A challenge is creating a workplace that is a great place to develop a career. BCG staff are encouraged to deliver to the agricultural industry while they are employed by BCG but, equally importantly, as they progress in their careers they have the desired skills, knowledge and capacity to keep on delivering for the broadacre agricultural community.

Having a workplace with a mission that staff align with, creating a workplace culture that encourages innovations, ideas and achievement and ensuring the work we do creates enough surplus to ensure that BCG can reinvest in infrastructure renewal and staff development is key to this.

## Funding Sources

While a significant percentage of BCG's income (up to 85%) is generated via the 40 projects being undertaken on behalf of State and Federal Government (mainly through the rural Research and

Development Corporations, the Department of Agriculture and State agriculture departments), a proportion of BCG's membership fees remain ear-marked to carryout locally relevant research and extension and to respond to seasonal issues as they present

## Future Opportunities & Challenges

Looking ahead, BCG aims to be proactive in navigating the challenges that confront farmers and the agricultural industry as a whole.

As technology rapidly changes and advances, one of BCG's key tasks will be to keep on top of new and emerging technologies to identify which ones increase farm profitability and ensure their members remain informed.

Another key challenge BCG is currently focusing on is helping growers to understand how their farm businesses have changed over the last two decades. This includes acknowledging that there have been significant rises in on-farm costs and the gap between this and farm income is narrowing. By understanding drivers behind these trends BCG hopes that farmers will be empowered to make decisions that will improve whole-farm outcomes and lower the risks that they face.

A recent aspiration of BCG has been to facilitate the adoption of research into the paddock one year sooner. How we achieve this is currently being contemplated as the BCG board reviews and sets the strategic plan for the next three years.

Front of mind, however, is ensuring that BCG is delivering value to its membership base and that the value of being a members is easily identifiable. In today's world where 'Google knows everything' and consumers can easily access information from a multitude of sources, it is important to create an organisation to which people want to belong.

BCG is now thinking about how its services local members, the emphasis shifting from purely providing information, to an organisation renowned for holding great events that create a buzz around high quality field-based research.

The groups members get to be involved in national research projects and, via traditional, as well as new extension platforms such as virtual events and e-communications, they can also access the skills and expertise needed to understand the role that technology, data collection management and analysis plays in boosting farm profitability.

# Corrigin Farm Improvement Group

## Contact Details:

Veronika Crouch,  
M: 0476 046 100, E: cfig@cfg.asn.au



## Corrigin Farm Improvement Group Fact File:

- Membership: 120 Farming business members
- The group employs 0.8 FTE
- The group has an executive committee with 16 members.
- 7% of CFGI income is membership
- 8% of CFGI income is from event sponsorship
- 85% of CFGI income is from project funding (however this varies significantly year to year).



## Group Background & History

The Corrigin Farm Improvement Group (CFIG) is a regionally based farming systems group covering the Shires of Corrigin, Bruce Rock, Narembeen, Kondinin and Kulin. The group was formed in 1983 by a group of local farmers wanting to trial new technology and varieties in local conditions. Currently CFGI have over 120 farming business members, which has remained stable over the past decade.

Since 1983 the group has evolved and has recently employed an Executive Officer to assist the group moving forward and to ensure that the group continues to deliver on its core mission: "to provide the latest information to agricultural businesses in the local community by conducting appropriate local research to enhance our social and economic well-being." CFGI still aims to promote farmer education in all aspects relevant to an agricultural environment, including delivering extension programs that are creative and attractive to members, encourage farmers to experiment on their own property and make results available to members and industry.

The group's greatest success are its members and their strong connection to the group as it has evolved over the last 30 years. There is a strong social aspect of the group which has arguably been CFGI's best asset. The group provides common ground for all members to network with peers and industry in a relaxed environment. CFGI's operations have allowed this aspect of the group to flourish. As the members are CFGI's key stakeholders, this social culture allows the group to best serve their members where possible.

## Board & Staffing Structure

Driving CFGI's activities is a 12 member committee that make decisions on behalf of the membership. The committee also takes a leading role in developing and managing the groups on farm research program.

Supporting the CFGI Board is recently appointed Executive Officer Veronika Crouch. Veronika provides administrative as well as project management support to the group which in turn has boosted CFGI's capacity to tender for and deliver large scale development and extension projects.

## Events & Activities

The group's primary activities include; annual field days, meetings, seminars and conferences on topics related to the business and social needs of members. Whilst facilitating collaboration cooperation with research institutions to conduct research and compile results of officially recorded work.

CFGI aims to provide the latest information to members by conducting locally relevant research to enhance the social and economic well-being of the Corrigin community.

The main focus of CFGI is to have local on -farm trials that are relevant to Corrigin and surrounding districts. Key research themes and priorities for CFGI fall under the headings of cropping, livestock and natural resource management. The current focus of the groups research program include investigations focusing on; non-wetting soils, frost, grazing crops and the introduction and maintenance of perennial pastures.

Current projects of CFGI include: Canola Demonstrations, NVT, Wheat Agronomy Trials, a Dry Seedling Trial, Biagra Band Trial, PrecisionAg Trial, Moulboarded Frost Trial, AGT, NPK & fuel Gauge Trial, Yield Prophet sites and much more. As CFGI are funded predominantly through project funding, there have been periods where the group has been more active than others. With the recent employment of their EO, CFGI are positive that the group will take a positive direction and get more trials on ground, that are requested by their members.

## Funding Sources

The group have taken a significant step forward and are currently investigating group sponsorship options. As CFGI currently do not have sponsorship arrangements, and all past sponsorship arrangements have been event based.

## Future Opportunities & Challenges

The biggest challenge for CFGI is obtaining a sustainable funding stream to enable the group to employ staff to assist in driving the continued growth of the group. In the past the group's structure has impeded growth as there was need for clear direction to allow the group to flourish.

Over the next five years CFGI would like to grow the activities of the group and see CFGI with two full time employees, who would manage at least 15 plus projects that expand into the shire of Kulin, Kondinin, Bruce Rock and Narembeen. They would like to ensure financial sustainability for the group and their staff to enable the group to continue to offer their members social and knowledgeable events in their area. CFGI would also like to review their strategic plan to ensure a clear action plan for success to reach their five year goal.

# Fitzgerald Biosphere Group

## Contact Details:

Anne Sparrow,  
T: (08) 9835 1127, E: anne@fbg.org.au



## Fitzgerald Biosphere Group Fact File:

- Membership: 80 Farming Business
- The group employs six staff (3.0FTE)
- The group has farmer board with 5 members
- Majority of FBG's income comes from project funding (however this can vary)



### Group Background & History

Fitzgerald Biosphere Group (FBG), based in Jerramungup was founded in 2002 from the merger of three local conservation and production groups. It now has a main street presence in the town of Jerramungup, co-located with the local Community Resource Centre, and operates in a mixed farming region from Jerramungup to Bremer Bay including wheat, barley, sheep and canola production.

Prior to the group becoming FBG, the Jerramungup LCDG was established to implement wind erosion mitigation strategies and projects. Revegetation projects commenced in 1984 and no till farming practice trials began in 1987. FBG is now managed by the next generation of farmers from those that founded the group. Growing up in such a Landcare focussed community, the farmers experienced a natural progression, resulting in profitable, sustainable agriculture and NRM working together.

### Fitzgerald Biosphere Group's Strategic Direction

In 2014 the FBG went through strategic planning, which included a shire-wide survey of landowners with an 80 per cent feedback rate. This was aimed at identifying the future direction of the group and the expectations the community had for the group. From this, three main focus themes were established

- Sustainable agriculture
- Healthy ecosystems
- Vibrant enterprises.

This process also discovered that the landowners in the area would like to see the group increase its capacity to deliver on more agricultural research as well as increase its development and extension role in soil health, weed management, nitrogen management as well as non-wetting soils.

### Board Structure

The FBG is managed by a farmer board consisting of five honorary positions, which are also guided by sub-committees including a farming group, estuary group, estuary advisory committee and Bremer Bay regional trials committee. The group has short and long term project specific reference groups comprising of the Biosphere Implementation Group, Sub Soil Constraints reference group and the Fitzgerald Biosphere Dieback Reference Group.

The FBG have a range of stakeholders who participate in the group at varying levels. The FBG's Advisory Committee includes representatives from the Shire of Jerramungup, Department of Agriculture and Food, South Coast NRM, Gondwana Link and Rabobank.

### Events & Activities

In regards to group operations, the FBG has a variety of events, trials and community engagement projects that it runs. These include events such as ladies days, grain marketing, school activities, succession planning as well as seminars, field days, workshops and art exhibitions within the community. The trials that the group is involved in are based around what is required in the Jerramungup and south coast regions including sheep productivity, fertilizer, nutrient systems and herbicide trials, Phytophthora Dieback management as well as whole of catchment scale wind erosion and salinity mitigation. The FBG have also been a part of community engagement projects such as fox shoot and baiting programs and strategic and action plans.

As the FBG is located on the south coast of Western Australia, the group also run coastal projects for which different stakeholders are a part of. The stakeholders for these projects include local businesses, Department of Parks and Wildlife, Department of Water, Department of Indigenous Affairs, South Coast Management Group and local ecologists. As well as the large stakeholders, the group believes in schools being important stakeholders in the region, "opportunities to involve youth in conservation activities are plentiful but we would like to explore how to engage schools meaningfully in core agricultural activities," Anne Sparrow said.

### Staffing Model

FBG currently employ six staff (3.0 FTE equivalent) to implement the day to day activities of the group over twelve current projects. The group have also established a level of governance to ensure safe, effective and comprehensive management of staff as well as resources. The group is housed within the Shire building and funded through projects, memberships and resources.

### Funding & Membership Structure

FBG has a three tiered paid membership structure including corporate, landholder and volunteer/associate groups. Members receive free attendance at field days, reduced fees or free workshops, calendar, newsletters and annual achievement report.

The FBG is currently mainly funded through its projects, with staff mandated to seek further funding within their job descriptions. The FBG aims to upskill their staff in sourcing funds through mentoring, workshops and courses provided by their stakeholders, funding bodies and educational organizations. Membership contributions also fund the group, however this only covers administrative staff and office expenditure that occurs above project deliverables. FBG Executive Officer Anne Sparrow stated "since 2005, the group has delivered more than six million dollars of funding into the community." Currently the FBG only has one official sponsor, Rabobank, as the group aims to retain an independent and unbiased approach to events, projects and other activities. However, in the survey, shire landowners were strongly supportive for FBG to seek sponsorship.

### Future Opportunities & Challenges

Looking forward, the FBG acknowledge that they need to lead and collaborate on projects to increase the sustainability of farming in the Jerramungup region. The group has a strong presence locally and its work must remain relevant to its members. In order to achieve this, the group aims to explore sponsorship from the corporate sector, however, the FBG will find a way to retain an independent and unbiased approach to information seeking and sharing, as it has always done before.

# Hart Field-Site Group

## Contact Details:

Sarah Noack - Research & Extension Manager

M: 0420 218 420 E: trials@hartfieldsite.org.au



## Hart Field-Site Group Fact File:

- Membership: 500
- Information freely available and distribute to 1000+.
- The group employees around 1.5 FTE
- The group has 12 board members
- 30% of HFSG's income comes from sponsorship
- 10% of HFSG's income comes from membership
- 10% of HFSG's income comes from commercial crop
- 50% of HFSG's income comes from project funding (however this can vary significantly year on year)



## Group Background & History

Hart is South Australia's premier agronomic field site, managed by farmers and agricultural industry professionals to provide independent information and skills to the broad acre cropping industry. Located between Blyth and Brinkworth in South Australia's Mid-North, Hart is situated on 40 hectares owned by the Hart Field-Site Group (HFSG).

The Hart Field-Site Group was formed in 1982 when it held an inaugural field day to compare different varieties of medics, clovers and lucerne, to determine which varieties best suited local conditions. During the 1980's the Department of Agriculture was providing significant support with the research program and co-ordination of events. In the mid-late 1990's, a significant change occurred as PIRSA (Primary Industries and Resources of South Australia) began to wind down its involvement in the site and fee-for-service was introduced across government agencies. In response, the farmers decided to privatise the operation of Hart and a management committee was formed.

In 2000, HFSG began running as a non-for-profit incorporated body under the governance of an appointed management committee. The opportunity for a permanent field site also became available, with the group deciding to purchase the 40 hectare site thanks to the support of the Wakefield Regional Council. With a permanent and independent site established, farmers and private consultants began to ramp up the operations of the Field Day. Industry funding was achieved from GRDC (Grains Research and Development Corporation) and SAGIT (South Australian Grain Industry Trust) and private sponsors were secured.

## Board Structure

In 2009, the HFSG updated its constitution and began operating as a Board rather than a Committee and three year terms were introduced for Board Members. The board can have up to 12 members appointed and currently is primarily farmers, industry and specific skill sets for group operations (eg. finance). Within the committee is an executive committee (made up of key office bearers and tasked with decision making outside board meetings) and sponsorship subcommittee.

The group still operates under the board structure and has added a number of new events to the program. The HFSG's mission remains to maintain a reputation as South Australia's premier agronomic field site, managed by farmers to provide independent information and skills to the agronomic industry that are cutting edge and innovative. To ensure this reputation is upheld, the group embraces the following core values:

- Independence in order to provide unbiased results;
- Relevance to issues facing farmers;
- Integrity in all dealings;
- Credibility through providing reliable, quality information;
- Professionalism in the management of the site and presentation of trials;
- Value for money low cost of information to farmers;
- Generosity in supporting other farmers and partners.

## Staffing Model

The HFSG employ contract staff for administration and media communications. Prior to 2013 the group also contracted a part-time trials manager. As many grower groups would understand the time associated with project applications, delivery and reporting has increased, as well as diversifying the

number of sources grower groups are targeting. This was the primary driver for the group deciding to employ a full-time research and extension manager in 2013. This role looks after management of the research program (eg. field measurements, grant writing) and extension.

## Funding & Membership

A long-term contact has also been held between the HFSG and the South Australian Research and Development Institute (SARDI) Clare location for site management. Since the HFSG itself does not own equipment they employ the SARDI team to seed, manage and harvest the trials. The vast majority of the funded positions or contract expense are project based. Sponsorship also contributes towards trials and extension which are funded by the HFSG.

In terms of membership, the HFSG has done the full circle. In the early days there was no membership other than a small fee to attend the field day. In the mid 2000's the HFSG developed a three tier membership structure to re-coup some of the operational costs. Increasingly it was becoming harder to give top level members value for money over other levels. Given the group operates with a small number of staff, the time allocated to prepare the final trial results book was large and was only sent to top level members. In 2013 the group decided to abolish the membership structure and revert back to membership paid at the field day at one level (\$30/person). Currently all of the research information and events (other than the field day) are freely available to anyone to access. The HFSG now sees 1000+ people accessing their information (hardcopy and website).

## Future Opportunities & Challenges

While the core activities of the group remain the same there has certainly been a change in research focus. In the groups initial stages pasture and livestock were a significant proportion of research program, with a recent shift towards continuous cropping or less livestock in the system. Some of the main research areas are now;

Weeds and herbicides, in particularly resistant annual ryegrass.

Stubble management in no-till systems (eg. baled, stripper front harvesters) which are raising questions are spray deposition and the efficacy of pre-emergent herbicides.

Nitrogen management investigating variety specific needs, the fit of legumes and losses from the system.

The biggest success of the group has and continues to be the research program. The program is a combination of farmer, industry and researcher input. This keeps the program relevant and ensures the latest information is being delivered to local farmers. The main field day (and other crop walks) showcase the research program by bringing research experts into the field for farmers to talk with and see what they are trialling.

The HFSG has and continues to play a role in hosting and educating various industry, agronomist and farmer groups from the Mid-North and beyond. The group also recognises its role in educating younger students to see agriculture as career path. For many years the HFSG have used the site for lectures and practical components for TAFE, school and university students. More recently the HFSG looks forward to the commencement of an internship program to mentor young graduates starting in 2016.

# Holt Rock Group

## Contact Details:

Kirsty Smith,  
M: 0438 954 712, E: holtrackgroup@gmail.com



## Holt Rock Group Fact File:

- Membership: 22 Farming Business
- The group employs a part time coordinator (0.2FTE)
- The group has an executive committee with 5 members
- 75% of the groups funding comes from membership
- 25% of the group funding comes from sponsorship
- Membership by invitation only



## Group Background & History

The Holt Rock Group is a closed grower group who draws its membership from the Holt Rock/Hyden Region in the south east of Western Australia. Formed in 1987 by a group of local growers who wanted to develop a more intimate platform to discuss farm business issues in depth and take ownership of their own on ground trials program, the Holt Rock Group is one of Western Australia's longest running grower groups.

The initial formation of the group was to provide local growers with an alternative to The Kondinin Group – a large group based in the area that provided a platform for growers to discuss new innovations and also reliability in machinery. Founding members of the Holt Rock Group believed that by having closed grower group; that limited the number of members but also did not open its trials or other activities up to the public, would not only ensure the group activities would remain relevant, but would also facilitate more open and in-depth discussion about critical on farm issues.

## Membership

As Holt Rock Group is a closed grower group, anyone seeking to become a new member has to show an interest and then be invited. The process requires the committee to first approve the request, and then be taken to a vote at the groups next Annual General Meeting (AGM). It is only once the group's current members have voted, by way of the AGM, to accept a new member that the member is formally invited to join the group. As the group has expanded, so has the group's demographic; "in the initial stages, the group was made up of mainly established farmers [who had been farming for 15-25 years] we now have members as young as 27 and some as old as 70," said Holt Rock Group coordinator Kirsty Smith.

In its early stages, the group had around 10 members who represented the more progressive growers in the area, but soon after sought to expand the group's membership to further broaden the group's knowledge base. The group now has 22 farm business members that represent around 40 individuals.

## Holt Rock's Strategic Direction

Driving the Holt Rock Group is the vision for the facilitation of open and honest information sharing, as well as investigating strategies to support farming businesses to remain profitable and sustainable in a marginal climate. Whilst the group does not have a strategic plan the group's activities will always be driven from the membership base and will be focused on detailed sharing of growers experiences in a closed group setting.

## Board Structure

Providing the strategic direction to the group is a five person committee consisting of a President, Treasurer and three ordinary members. The committee dynamic can vary greatly from year to year, as one of the obligations of becoming a member is that you must actively contribute to the group's activities, though taking a role in developing trials, and becoming a committee office bearer at some point.

The implication of this is that in some instances the committee can be made up of people that may not have the time or drive to implement the group's activities, thus leaving the bulk of the organisation to the President and coordinator, rather than to the committee as a whole. Committee terms are minimum two years.

## Activities & Events

Currently Holt Rock Group's activities are focused around how to maintain grower's profitability in light of challenging climatic conditions. The group has an emphasis on, the impact of the use of variable rate technology, the cost effective amelioration of soil acidity issues and the impact of early sowing on crop establishment as well as the long term profitability of the farming enterprise. It investigates these issues by either allocating a member who is interested in a topic to trial it on a farm scale, or with most scenarios, members undertake their own on farm trials and then share it with the group at field walks.

Additionally, every year the group will case study one member, taking a no holds barred look at their farm business right through to the things that have worked very well, to the areas that the grower is struggling with. The discussion that this activity generates really determines its success to the group, "listening to the members dissect the pros and cons of a particular idea, really drives home how much they have gained from being exposed to that new practice or trial," says Kirsty.

## Staffing Model

Holt Rock Group employs a part time coordinator who has always been an agronomist, with a view that they provide the group with technical advice, guide their discussions and look after the day to day running of the group.

## Funding Sources

Funding of the Holt Rock Group is based on a mix of membership and sponsorship, with around 75% of the groups funding base coming from membership fees and the remaining 25% being derived from sponsorship. The group does not run its own trial program, and as such does not seek to pursue project funding, rather seeking to partner with local agribusiness to ensure that they conduct relevant trials in the area. Coordinator Kirsty Smith says that the group does not have a problem gaining the support of industry professionals looking to do product trials with the group, "in most instances it (the trials) represents a win-win as they are looking to get access to the group and we want to see how their product or system works in our own area."

## Future Opportunities & Challenges

The biggest challenge for the group in the foreseeable future is to ensure the group remains relevant and still generates good attendance at events. According to Kirsty, with much more information being available online and farmers being generally 'time poor' these days, the group needs to work really hard to ensure that the group activities are still valued by the members.

Ideally the group would like to be at the forefront of the next big innovation, as the past 15 years has seen a dramatic change in farming practices from the adoption of no-till to the introduction of Control Traffic Farming. Kirsty sees that the progressiveness of the group and their ability to communicate openly and honestly amongst themselves will allow them to remain relevant and innovative. There is still an overwhelming desire to keep the group closed as that platform allows grower to honestly share both their successes and failures which in Kirsty's mind, are the most valuable interactions when seeking to learn and improve practice.



# Mallee Sustainable Farming

## Contact Details:

Stuart Putland,  
T: (03) 5021 9106, E: stuart.putland@msfp.org.au



## Mallee Sustainable Farming Fact File:

- Membership: Around 1000 individuals
- The group employees 2.5 FTE
- The group has an board of ten directors
- MSF does not has a membership fee
- Majority of MSF's income comes from projects
- Sponsorship is sought for specific events only



### Group Background & History

Mallee Sustainable Farming Inc. (MSF) is a farmer driven organisation delivering research and extension services to the less than 350mm rainfall Mallee cropping regions of New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia. MSF operates within a region of over four million hectares, extending beyond Balranald (NSW) in the east to Murray Bridge (SA) in the west, and has a membership of around 1000.

MSF was formed in 1997 in response to a recognition that conservation farming practices had not been widely adopted across the region. There was a need to identify the issues restricting the adoption of technology that would enhance the development of profitable and sustainable farming systems.

During its first 17 years of operation, MSF has achieved a great deal in partnership with Mallee farmers. Increases in farm profitability have been observed as a result of activities undertaken in conjunction with industry scientists and advisers, along with environmental and social gains.

MSF continues to strive to be relevant to farmers' information needs, whether in the sphere of cereal cropping or livestock management, supporting farmers to increase their knowledge and skills to meet continually changing production, environmental, climate and market challenges.

The Mallee has approximately 2000 dryland farming families whose farming activities include cropping (wheat, barley, vetch, lupins, lentils, chickpeas and canola) and livestock (sheep for wool, lambs and cattle for meat).

### Mallee Sustainable Farming's Strategic Direction

MSF's mission is to provide excellence in research, development and extension initiatives for the dryland Mallee of South Eastern Australia. The principal purpose is to protect and enhance the natural environment by the encouragement of sustainable dryland farming practices. These goals are outlined in the MSF strategic plan.

### Board Structure

MSF is governed by a board which consists of six farmer directors (two from each state of Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia) and four specialist directors who bring key strategic strengths to the board in the areas of corporate governance, research, grain marketing and business management. Board positions are for a term of two years. Within the board there are four sub-committees: Research, Development and Extension; Communications and Membership; Human Resources; and Executive and Finance. These sub-committees make decisions relevant to their respective areas and report back to the board for approval.

### Activities & Events

Community engagement projects have also been a priority and success for MSF. An example of this was the "Strengthening Communities" Project funded by the Federal Department of Social Services, initiated through the drought recovery program. This project focussed on creating social cohesion and capacity development within rural communities throughout the MSF region and activities supported included the 'Hatfield Happening' ladies' day run by the Isolated Children's Parents Association; firefighting, first aid training and kids art activities in the Pooncarie area; and cooking activities in the Karoonda and Pinnaroo areas.

### Staffing Model

MSF has a staff of 2.5FTE and has a close working relationship with Michael Moodie of Moodie Agronomy, who undertakes MSF's agronomic work. MSF Staff are tasked with communications, extension and event management roles, they do not do any of the on-farm trial work.

### Funding & Membership

Initially offering paid membership to Mallee farmers these memberships are now free of charge, allowing MSF to attract a greater membership base. MSF activities are open to all farmers with a strengthening membership base receiving new and timely information on research, best management practices and practical solutions. Such activities include fact sheets, farm walks, trial sites, field days, farmer groups and research compendium publications. Event attendance is generally free.

MSF is funded through project work and doesn't receive any income from membership. Sponsorship is sought for specific events such as field days and the annual Tri-State Forums. This open membership allows MSF to work freely with other industry groups and through extensive collaborative networks MSF has been able to develop a scientifically rigorous research, development and extension program. The primary focus of MSF is to undertake, and bring-in, research and extension activities which are of relevance to Mallee. Current projects (20 in total) are related to Integrated Weed Management (IWM), break crops, legume management, GPS grazing and managing stubble-retained systems, among others.

Key funders include the Grains Research and Development Corporation, South Australian Grains Industry Trust, Western Local Land Service, Mallee Catchment Management Authority, South Australian Murray Darling Basin Natural Resource Management Board and federal Department of Agriculture among others. MSF collaborates closely with the CSIRO and SARDI in trial development as well as various universities such as the University of Adelaide, University of South Australia and University of New England in research activities. MSF also collaborates in project delivery with other farming systems groups such as Birchip Cropping Group (BCG) Southern Farming Systems (SFS) and Central West Farming Systems (CWFS). As a result of strong collaborations, MSF directs a lot of funding out to other organisations.

### Future Opportunities & Challenges

MSF's biggest challenge is to facilitate research and extension activities in an area (Mallee) where the state departments of agriculture are minimising the resources they contribute. By taking on a network facilitation role, MSF draws on its strong relationships with CSIRO, SARDI, universities, agribusiness and farmers to attract research and extension activities to the Mallee region as well as other research which is of relevance to Mallee farming systems. These relationships are, and will continue to be, critical for MSF to assist members in achieving practice change on and in their farming enterprises.

In five years' time, MSF plans to have evolved to be the most efficient and effective organisation in delivering information to help farmers in the Mallee region to be sustainable, dynamic and profitable.

# North East Farming Futures

## Contact Details:

Jenny Thomas ,  
M: 0467 640 722, E: innovation@neffgroup.com.au



Photos courtesy of NEFF Group



## North East Farming Futures Fact File:

- Membership is determined by the four regional grower groups that NEFF supports
- The group employs around 1 FTE with other specialist services being contracted in on an as needs basis
- The group has a management committee with 12 members
- NEFF Does not charge membership fees
- 90% of NEFF's income comes from grant funding
- 10% of NEFF's income comes from support from the four member groups respective shires.



## Background & History

North East Farming Futures Group Inc (NEFF), formed in 2007, is an overarching regional grower group alliance based in North Eastern Agricultural Region (NEAR). NEFF covers a region that encompasses both the low and medium rainfall zones where member's enterprises are predominantly focused on cereal and legume with a small amount of livestock. On average NEFF members account for 59% of deliveries into the Geraldton Port Zone.

Climate variability, rising input costs, land degradation and other challenges have put pressure on the farming systems in the region, this coupled with a series of drought years, led to the NEAR being declared an 'Exceptional Circumstances Declared Area' between 2005 and 2008. In 2005, the Federal Government funded an Agricultural Partnership Project (ADP) to assist the community to investigate opportunities which would lead to more long term sustainability through new enterprises, land-use and improved management. The ADP funded two strategic projects which in turn led to the formation of NEFF in 2007.

In 2008, NEFF won the contract to deliver the Rural Financial Counselling Service project (RFCSWA) in WA. The then CEO managed both organisations, but NEFF and the RFCSWA had separate boards. However, the emphasis on the RFCSWA contract and the office relocation from Morawa to Geraldton, led to the groups focus being shifted from NEFF's core mission of: enabling farm businesses and grower groups in the NEAR to become more adaptive and increase productivity through informed decision making and innovation.

## NEFF's Strategic Direction

Given this situation the NEFF board eventually came to the conclusion in 2012 that it lacked a clear purpose, was standing still and was in need of reinvigoration. This resulted in the decision to appoint an Innovation Officer to reboot and reinvigorate the NEFF brand within the agricultural industry. As part of this review process, NEFF and RFCSWA and began operating as separate entities in April 2014.

NEFF's strategic plan outlines the following goals to achieve on ground activities that support farmers and locally based grower groups. These include:

- Increase the capacity of NEFF members to innovate through greater access to, and collaboration with, farm improvement groups, researchers and other expertise.

- Increase access to funding for priority activities in the NEAR that will benefit members.
- Improve regional strategic networks across industry sectors and government at all levels.
- Advocate the opportunities and challenges faced by farmers in the NEAR to all spheres of government.

At a regional level, NEFF provides the linkages and network communication between the four grower groups, provides expertise and critical mass in developing activities and programmes that increase on farm productivity, sustainability and profitability.

## Board & Committee Structure

NEFF's Committee of Management consists of twelve members comprising of four independent skills based specialists with expertise in; banking, agronomy, governance as well a representative from the Department of Agriculture and Food WA. Making up the remainder of the board are two grower representatives from each of the four groups in the NEFF region;

- Morawa Farm Improvement Group
- Mullewa Dryland Farming Initiative
- Perenjori Farming Forward and
- Yuna Farm Improvement Group

NEFF has two subcommittees, Finance and Audit and Innovations and Communication, each of which are made up of NEFF Committee of Management members.

In 2014, the Finance and Audit Committee was setup to assist the Committee of Management in fulfilling the organisations governance responsibilities. The Finance and Audit Committee also oversees NEFF's financial reporting, internal control structure, risk management systems, external audit functions and compliance and external accounting responsibilities.

In 2015 the Innovations and Communications Sub Committee was formed to identify regional research that fills in the low rainfall agronomic gaps. The Sub Committee is then charged with prioritising the best research ideas and extension projects and then presenting these options to the NEFF Committee of Management to consider.

## Staffing Model

The staffing structure at NEFF is very lean with the Innovation Officer being the only FTE. The other services NEFF require such as bookkeeping, communications specialist and board secretary are all contracted in. Once project funding is secured the project team is brought together and then disband on the completion of the project.

## Funding Sources

In line with NEFF's Rules of Association, membership to the Association is open to landholders or farming entities within the Shires of Chapman Valley, Morawa, Perenjori and District of Mullewa. Landholders or farming entities outside the boundaries of these Shires may be granted membership subject to the approval of the board.

Given NEFF's overarching structure there is no paid membership, this is due to two grower groups charging their participants a membership fee. However, given the financial constraints this may change in the future.

In NEFF's formative years it received a financial contribution from all four Shires, however as their budgets have significantly tightened they have relinquished their financial contribution. NEFF does not seek on going sponsorship opportunities but rather seek sponsorship for specific events. That way NEFF is not seen as taking sponsorship opportunities away from its member groups.

NEFF is primarily funded by grants, however, according to NEFF Innovation Officer Jenny Thomas "in line with tightening economic conditions it's highly competitive due to the decreased number of grants to choose from and apply for."

## Future Opportunities & Challenges

Jenny sees the group's biggest challenge as being securing enough revenue to enable NEFF to continue operating and developing activities and programs that increase on farm productivity, sustainability and profitability for growers located in the North Eastern Agricultural Region.

# Northern Agri Group

## Contact Details:

Raylene Burns,  
M: 0408 931 924, E: northernagrigrp@bigpond.com



## Northern Agri Group Fact File:

- Membership: 60 farming businesses
- The group has no staff
- The group has an executive committee with 12 members
- 50% of NAG's income comes from sponsorship
- 20% of NAG's income comes from membership
- 10% of NAG's income comes from project funding (however this can vary)
- 20% of NAG's income comes from the community crop



## Group Background & History

The Northern Agri Group (NAG) is a small grower-driven group based in northern most tip of WA's Wheatbelt. It was formed in 2004 with core vision of delivering locally relevant agricultural research and to keep the community of Binu sustainable.

In its initial phases, NAG was contracted to run a controlled stocking rate project in conjunction with local agronomists. To ensure that the group meet the requirements of the project NAG employed two staff. When the project finished in 2006 the group moved to a model with no staff, just a grower-driven committee.

The group now, in 2015, has around 60 farm business members and seven corporate members, with a crossover of about five farm business also being members of the Yuna Farm Improvement Group. In the early stages of the group, there was very little scope for cross-membership as NAG had strict criteria for a farmer's primary property to be north of the East-West Ogilvie Road. In 2014 the group's constitution was changed to derestrict membership as long as NAG 'did not negatively impact on the operations of any other grower group'.

One of the things that makes NAG unique is their membership demographic. According to President Karl Suckling, having a mix of young growers who have been farming for five years or less, combined with very established farmers who have been at it of over 25 years, ensures that the group not only remains innovative but also true to its mission of keeping the community of Binu alive and delivering a relevant and innovative trial program to its membership base.

## NAG's Strategic Direction

Whilst the group does not have a formal strategic plan the group's vision is clearly outlined in its constitution. The core vision of the group is to ensure a strong community and deliver a relevant trials program. At its heart, NAG is entirely driven by what its members want, and to further ensure the group's relevancy the group surveys its membership base annually to collect research priorities. Through these surveys the group has identified 'managing seasonal variability' as their primary research priority with 'managing herbicide resistance' and 'non-wetting soils' being the group's secondary research priorities.

## Board Structure

NAG has a committee of 12 members made up of local farmers, who not only set the strategic direction of the group but also organise the groups' trial program, events, workshops and social events. President Karl Suckling says that even though a 12 member committee makes it tough to keep meetings on track, it also spreads the load across a number of people as there are no staff to do the legwork. In the last 12 months the group has established its first subcommittee. The ladies committee focus on the community aspects of the group and is tasked with organising 2-3 social events during the year. Further, by having a large committee it ensures that group members are well represented, not only geographically but also demographically with a good mix of established and new farmers on board.

## Events & Activities

NAG showcases its trials at a spring field day in September that attracts up to 120 attendees. This event provides an opportunity for growers in the local area to come and see firsthand how issues that they have identified are being tackled at a local level. In addition to the spring field day NAG organises fortnightly crop tours, which provides members with an opportunity to learn off each other's successes and mistakes, as well as providing an opportunity for a social catch up.

In addition to the groups research focus, they also hosted the 2015 inaugural fishing competition. Karl says, "The majority of the group were coming of the back of a string of very average years, no one really wanted to talk about farming so the group decided to host a fishing competition instead." The idea behind the event was to give members the opportunity to get off their farms and to do something a bit different.

## Staffing Model

The NAG committee has from time to time discussed employing a part time coordinator to manage the administrative aspects of the group. The group did not see the employment of full time staff necessary to be aligned with the group's strategic direction. Instead the NAG manages its activities by not over committing itself to a large number of projects but rather striving to do what they do properly.

## Funding Sources

As the group operates without any staff the funding that it receives from projects only makes up around 10% of its total budget, with sponsorship contributing up to 50% of the groups income and the remaining 40% split evenly between membership and proceeds from the community crop. In terms of sponsorship, the group doesn't seek large agreements, rather small amounts that enables the group to have a degree of autonomy as sponsors do not seek have an influence on the group's activities. In previous years the group has discussed increasing the amount of sponsorship the group requests, however the group has little capacity to provide more than it already offers.

On top of the traditional income streams, NAG receives a large degree of in kind support from the Department of Agriculture and Food WA (DAFWA) in the form of a relationship manager who helps the group effectively deliver on identified research priorities and develop projects to address these. The group heavily relies on the assistance that DAFWA provides, to help ensure that the group can continue to remain relevant and deliver real benefits to its membership base. The group also receives in-kind support from local agronomists who provide assistance to the group on specific projects they are undertaking this support is usually provided as a form of sponsorship with the agronomy company providing professional rather than financial support to groups.

## Future Opportunities & Challenges

One of the challenges the group has faced in the past several years is getting direct feedback from growers regarding the impact and relevance of their activities for their membership base. In the past the group has tried to gauge the success and impact of its projects through the use of surveys however they found they had a less than desirable response rate. Now, the group opt to use clicker based instant polling at their autumn field day as their primary gauge of their wider impact, however they still believe the most accurate gauge of the impact and success of projects is through attendance numbers at events.

Karl sees the groups biggest challenge is maintaining the group in its current role and capacity; including the maintenance of membership numbers, continued support from DAFWA, the role NAG plays in the local community and the continued development of new ideas. The biggest success to date being the group's ability to remain relevant over a board demographic.

# South East Premium Wheat Growers Association

## Contact Details:

Niki Curtis,  
T: 9083 1125, E: eo@sepwa.org.au



## South East Premium Wheat Growers Fact File:

- Membership: 270 farming businesses
- A further 30 associated members and 20 sponsors
- SEPWA members make up 85% of the grain delivery in the EPZ
- The group employees around 3.4 FTE
- The group has an executive committee with 12 members & 5 Subcommittees
- 39% of SEPWA's income comes from Sponsorships
- 11% of SEPWA's income comes from memberships
- 50% of SEPWA's income comes from project funding (however this can vary significantly year on year)



## Group Background & History

South East Premium Wheat Growers Association (SEPWA) is a large Western Australian grower group covering the entire Esperance Port Zone (EPZ). With over 30 sponsors and 270 grower members, who produce around 85% of the grain grown in the region, SEPWA is an integral part of the Esperance farming community.

SEPWA was formed in 1993 by a group of local growers wanting to overturn the long held assumption that grain produced in the EPZ was of an inferior quality. Initially, one of the group's primary mandates was to investigate what the end users of EPZ grain wanted. This involved the group sending delegations of members to Indonesia to investigate specific requirements of that market, which in itself was an unrepresented move as at the time, as the acquisition, export and marketing of grain was the sole responsibility of the Australian Wheat Board (AWB).

## SEPWA's Strategic Direction

From its inception in 1993, SEPWA's mission has evolved, however the group still sees its primary objective is to represent its membership base through ensuring that EPZ issues are heard. In addition to this representational role, the group seeks to ensure that key research organisations are conducting research that is relevant to the EPZ's specific issues. In some cases SEPWA has sought to fill the research gap themselves, conducting farmer scale variety trials in; Esperance, Grass Patch, Scaddan, Salmon Gums, Ravensthorpe, Lake King, and Mount Madden.

Whilst the group's strategic plan provides a big picture overview of the groups' direction, SEPWA Executive Officer Niki Curtis says it is important that the group is not entirely bound by the document.

"The group also needs to be able to react to issues members raise, if the scope our actives were limited to the strategic plan we would not be able to serve our membership effectively and react to issues (such as data accessibility) as they occur," Said Niki.

## Board Structure

Aside from the strategic plan, SEPWA's broad direction and key decisions are made by the group's executive board. The Executive is made up of 12 members, two of which are local consultants and the rest farmers. Meeting once a month; the executive raises local issues, and develops ideas around how to tackle them.

According to Niki, the executive committee has a driven ethos, not wanting to get bogged down in the finer details. Niki attributes this style of board function to the business of its members, who, in most cases are running multi-million

dollar farming operations. This is further compounded by distance, with some executive committee members traveling for up to three hours to attend a board meeting and they are not paid.

Holding a position on the SEPWA Executive is held in very high regard with in the EPZ, with the executive committee being seen as an excellent place for growers to start to take ownership of their industry. The executive committee can also be a launching pad in to other roles, with immediate past President David Cox now holding a position on the CBH board and another former President, Peter Roberts now the Chairman of GRDC's Western Panel.

In addition to SEPWA's executive committee the group has five subcommittees; Finance & Governance; Trials; Esperance Farm Office Management (EFOM group); Events and the SEPWA Ladies Committee. These committees are convened on an as needs basis and operate with a high degree of autonomy – reporting back to the Executive.

The most significant change the group has seen over the short term has been the formation of the EFOM group. The group operates as a subcommittee of SEPWA, and aims to build the skills and capacity of farm office managers through the development of resources and the delivery of targeted workshop events throughout the year.

## Events & Activities

Unlike many system's based grower groups, SEPWA seeks to undertake projects that go beyond the farm gate, such as the group's recent foray in to investigating high speed telecommunications infrastructure for rural farm businesses.

All of SEPWA's activities are driven by the group's strategic plan which has three overarching goals;

1. To ensure the delivery of a complete package of research, development and extension to the EPZ each year.
2. To increase the profitability of the EPZ through influence and lobby.
3. To professionally manage the business of SEPWA on an ongoing basis.

The type and scope of projects that SEPWA undertakes is a reflection of the culture of innovation that is synonymous with the EPZ. Both the staff and the members of group feed off each other supporting the further investigation and dissemination of new ideas, that will in turn support the ongoing profitability and sustainability of EPZ farming business and the region as a whole.

Many of these innovations have risen from the group's continual desire to ensure it remains connected to its membership base, despite the huge area geographical area that the group covers.

According to Mrs Curtis, SEPWA's ongoing success and relevance to the EPZ is derived from the group having a clear mandate, clear goals and clear boundaries, which all work to deliver real benefits to its membership base and the EPZ as a whole.

## Staffing Model

Supporting SEPWA's committees is a small team of driven staff members, led by Executive Officer Niki Curtis. The group funds the full time executive officer position, part time media officer, book keeper and trials coordinator through income generated through sponsorship and the two project officers through income received from undertaking specific projects.

## Funding Sources

With over 30 sponsors providing a solid funding base for the group, SEPWA is able to be quite discerning about what projects the group choses to tender for and undertake. This ensures the group does not engage in projects that are not relevant to its membership base. Due to SEPWA's whole port zone coverage and strong financial base, the group also provides support to smaller, more district specific grower groups such as the North Mallee Farm Improvement Group and Neridup Soil Conservation Group and they work in collaboration with the Ravensthorpe Agricultural Initiative Network (RAIN); which is more focused on NRM issues and broader systems farming.

In addition to sponsors, SEPWA receives a large amount of in kind support from local agribusiness as well as other professionals who donate their time and expertise to the group free of charge. The group maintains a close working relationship with The Department of Agriculture and Food (DAFWA), with the SEPWA offices being housed within DAFWA. One indirect advantage of being housed at DAFWA is that the SEPWA staff have easy access to leading agricultural researchers which promotes the effective two way flow of information between SEPWA, their members and the Department's researchers.

## Future Opportunities & Challenges

Going forward, SEPWA is aiming to remain focussed on its direction as outlined in its strategic plan. SEPWA is aware of the changing demographic of research with the recent on-going funding cuts to DAFWA. The group is very keen to see DAFWA continue its research in the EPZ, but aware that gaps may need to be filled over time as things like the Esperance Downs Research station are released from Government into private ownership.

The group is also looking to increase trials in the Mallee region and has set up a working group to look at leasing land in the area to better focus on improving farming systems opportunities for its members in the lower rainfall areas.

# Southern DIRT

## Contact Details:

Pip Crook,  
T: (08) 9831 1074, E: eo@southerndirt.com.au



## Southern DIRT Fact File:

- Membership: 75 farming businesses
- The group employs around 1.4 FTE
- The group has an executive committee with 8 members
- 22 % of Southern DIRT's income comes from sponsorship
- 5% of Southern DIRT's income comes from membership
- 70% of Southern DIRT's income comes from project and event funding (however this can vary)
- 3% of Southern DIRT's income comes from other sources.



## Group Background & History

Southern DIRT was formed in 2010 after a meeting of growers in the High Rainfall Zone to discuss the potential of a grower group to service mixed farming businesses in the High Rainfall Zone (HRZ). Over time, the focus on the HRZ has shifted to include farm business in the medium rainfall zones of Western Australia. The group still maintains a strong emphasis on mixed farming, although membership includes businesses operating as solely cropping or livestock enterprises.

## Southern DIRT's Strategic Direction

The overarching vision of Southern DIRT is articulated in the group's strategic plan, which seeks "to grow the productivity and profitability of mixed farming in the southern region of Western Australia". This vision will be achieved through attracting resources to enable research and extension targeted to mixed farming systems in the area. These activities will be supported by the group seeking to share knowledge and support members to realise profit in their farming systems, as well as contributing to the members' local communities. Southern DIRT has recently undergone a strategic review and planning process, to prepare a new Strategic Plan which will guide the group into the 2020.

## Board Structure:

The group is governed by a skills based board of eight members, and meets approximately 5-6 times per year. The board members take responsibility for portfolios including; Finance, RD & E; Policy & Corporate Governance, Sponsors, Industry & Corporate Partners, Marketing, Brand & Membership Management, Human Resources, Staff Support and; Strategic Planning. All Board members contribute to decision making on all matters relating to the group's strategic and operational issues. The group also has a R&D Committee which includes members who don't sit on the board. The role of the R&D committee is to identify the group's research priorities and develop projects that will work towards addressing them.

## Activities & Events

For the first few years of the group's existence, the focus was mainly on hosting events, and several field days. In addition to these events the group managed the pilot Regional Cropping Solutions Network (RCSN) project across five CBH port zones from 2011/12 to 2013/14. In the past three years, the group has hosted a number of field trials funded through a range of bodies such as the GRDC and various local NRM groups. The group also is engaging in a number of collaborative projects with a wide range of grower groups from across the state. Some of these projects include; a GRDC funded legume rotation project with Stirlings to Coast and West Arthur Trials Group and a GRDC funded lime incorporation trial and extension project with the Liebe Group, West Midlands Group and Mingenew-Irwin Group.

The group's flagship trial is the DIRT to \$ Cropping Challenge, an innovative cropping competition where agribusiness, growers, and schools pit their cropping skills against one another to see who can grow the highest yielding and most profitable crop. 2015 marks the final year of the current competition, and planning is underway for continuation of the project.

The current focus of the group has been sharing information to increase profitability of farming business. The most important role of the group has been to facilitate the opportunity for members to increase their skills and knowledge in various aspects of their business. A further example of this was the 2015 Southern DIRT Techspo held in Katanning, where various technologies applicable to cropping and livestock enterprises were showcased, together with conference sessions highlighting more specific examples of how growers are using technology to improve their businesses.

## Staffing Model

Since its inception, the group has grown to include part time paid staff, including an Executive Officer, Administration Officer and Projects Officer, who provide services and support to the group's 75 farming business members. These businesses cover an area from Brookton in the north to Plantagenet in the south, and include areas as far west as Boyup Brook to Katanning in the east.

## Membership & Funding

Membership fees cover all members of the business, including family members and employees. Associate members and commercial members are also included on distribution lists for group updates and trial information. Membership accounts for less than 10 per cent of annual funding, so maintaining strong, mutually beneficial relationships with corporate sponsors and ensuring that all events not directly attached to a project are run at a small profit is vital to the long term viability of the group.

## Future Opportunities & Challenges

The group's challenges include maintaining sustainable funding to continue to service members' needs across a wide geographic range, and increasing member engagement and participation which are imperative to the long term viability of the group. The group grew very rapidly over a relatively short period of time, so the current challenge is to maintain the energy and enthusiasm of to the same level since the group's inception. The challenges of mixed farming also provide an opportunity for the continued development of innovative projects.

Southern DIRT's successes have been the result of very professional attitude towards the business aspects of the group as well as a solid network of grower, industry, research and extension contacts. This, combined with a robust governance structure implemented from the initial stages of the group has ensured ongoing relevance and effectiveness of the group. As well as this robust structure, the group is driven from with ground up with innovative members who share a passion for agriculture have been the root of Southern DIRT 's successes, and will continue to do so into the future.

# Western Australian No Till Farming Association



## Contact Details:

David Minkey,  
T: 0417 999 304, E: david.minkey@wantfa.com.au

## Western Australia No Till Farming Association Fact File:

- Membership: 450 farming businesses
- A further 250 non-farming members
- The group employees around 7.0 FTE
- The group has an executive committee with 7 members
- 7% of WANTFA's income comes from sponsorship
- 8% of WANTFA's income comes from membership
- 85% of WANTFA's income comes from project funding (however this can vary)



## Group Background & History

The Western Australian No Tillage Farming Association (WANTFA) is a state-wide grower group that was founded in 1992 with the aim of promoting the use and adoption of conservation agriculture, especially no tillage techniques to prevent the impact of wind and water erosion in broadacre farming systems.

Whilst the initial adoption of no tillage farming systems was around the south coast and northern sand plains where erosion was most problematic, it quickly became apparent that no-till farming systems were extremely efficient, and adoption rates rapidly increased. In the late 90's the group started employing professional staff, which in turn led to GRDC funding the group to set up its first no-till demonstration site in Meckering.

## Membership

At its peak WANTFA had around 1000 members but currently membership sits at around 450 farm business members and 250 non-grower members. Ninety five percent of their membership is based in Western Australia, with others being based in South Australia and overseas. WANTFA Executive Director David Minkey says membership numbers have been quite stable for a number of years but he also notes that the reasons behind people deciding to join the association is changing. A lot of the new members have been younger growers, with many joining to access WANTFA publications such as the quarterly journal.

Now that no-till farming systems has been widely adopted throughout WA, the Association has shifted to other aspects of the conservation farming system that have not been as widely adopted such as: wide crop rotations, compaction management and permanent ground cover.

## WANTFA's Strategic Direction

Since its inception, WANTFA has actively shifted its activities from an extension and adoption focus to an organisation seeking to conduct applied farming systems research. The reason behind this shift was to be able to come up with new solutions for growers rather than just extending current information. It meant that collaboration became essential in order to bring the appropriate skill set to projects. The shift is outlined in the group's most recent strategic plan which outlines the groups overarching vision of the group and organisation's internal and external goals which include ensuring the group seeks to maintain corporate governance structures and process, developing new research, employing people to have the skills and expertise to facilitate the development of that research as well as ensuring that the group is financially sustainable in the long term.

## Board Structure

As WANTFA's focus has shifted over the years so has the board's composition, with a board which previously consisted entirely of grower members, to the current board which now has five growers, one independent and one researcher member.

Unlike many traditional grower groups, WANTFA's board performs more of a governance function, seeking to ensure that the Association and its staff are meeting predefined goals and objectives rather than providing a large amount of operational input. This current board dynamic represents a notable shift, as in the early stages of the group the activities were 100% driven from the ground up with the board making the majority of the decisions and the staff making the ideas happen. The drivers of WANTFA's activities have now shifted to where staff can do 99% of the legwork, with the board having final approval on key decisions..

## Events & Activities

Currently the research areas that the group is seeking to focus on are;

1. The support of the use of biotechnology within farming systems
2. The incorporation of livestock into the no-till system
3. The ongoing support and promotion of precision agriculture technologies
4. Applying the latest research to localised growing conditions

In addition to focusing on the above research priorities the groups still maintains a large field day site based in Cunderdin. The site features a wide range of trials, not only showcasing the group's projects but providing central location for other researchers and agribusiness to showcase their work. WANTFA hosts both a winter field walk and a spring field day, with the spring event attracting more than 200 attendees. It is interesting to note however that out of the 200 attendees only 30-40 will be WANTFA members which indicates that WANTFA's influence goes well beyond its own membership base. "This reflects the fact that WANTFA is a state wide association and not a local group," David said

## Staffing Model

The group currently employees around 7 FTE staff, with 4 FTE entirely funded through projects. The Executive Director, Marketing Manager and the administration officer are partially funded through sponsorship with the remainder being filled through project funding. David notes the way staff are funded can be quite dynamic, as it is highly depended on what projects the group has on their books at any one time.

## Funding Sources

The groups business model is highly depend on project funding, making up to 85% of the group's total budget, with membership and sponsorship filling the remainder. David concedes this funding base is a risky strategy, however with the membership unlikely to increase, the group is always going to be heavily reliant of project funding. This also represents a large risk in terms of guaranteeing job security to experienced staff members over the long term.

Despite the constant uncertainty of long term funding, David says the group still needs be discerning about the projects the Association takes on, "we [WANTFA] won't apply for anything that does not fit with in the conservation farming system". While we do also promote areas of research such as "livestock management" and "strategic tillage to overcome soil constraints" these are all in context of a long term conservation farming system.

## Future Opportunities & Challenges

With the WANTFA's biggest success being the wide adoption of no-tillage farming systems, the group has found that there is a massive expectation to deliver wide scale adoption when it comes to other farming technologies and practices. This ability to manage stakeholder's expectations and effectively quantify the wider impact of the groups more recent project has been a real challenge. David attributes this to the fact that the adoption of a no-tillage farming system represented large scale practice change, which was relatively easy to measure. Now, projects and new research is really focusing on making aspects of the system better, making it much more difficult to really understand the wider impact and benefit of some projects. The group has, however, sought to tap in to existing data sets, such as paying for the use of Planfarm's benchmarking database to attempt to understand the impact it activities are having on certain farming practices such as dry seeding.

Looking to the future, David would ideally like to see the organisation partnered with a group of researchers based at a university or CSIRO who were focused on conservation farming with WANTFA leading the on-ground delivery of the research. He would like to see long term core funding for WANTFA that would underpin future activities, and enable the group to employ industry leading researchers and provide autonomy to drive its own research agenda.

# West Midlands Group

## Contact Details:

Anne Wilkins,  
T: 9651 4008, E: anne@wmggroup.org.au



## West Midlands Group Fact File:

- Membership: 120 farming businesses
- The group employees around 4.0 FTE
- The group has an executive committee with 7 members
- 30% of WMG's income comes from sponsorship
- 6% of WMG's income comes from membership
- 52% of WMG's income comes from project funding (however this can vary)
- 12% of WMG's income comes from the sub lease of the Badgingarra research station.



## Group Background & History

West Midlands Group (WMG), based in Dandaragan, is a relatively young grower group which was founded as a result of the amalgamation of five local Land Conservation District Committees (LCDC) in 2008. Initially based in the West Midlands area, the group's coverage now extends as far as Eneabba in the north to Perenjori in the east and Gingin in the south.

From 2008-2012 WMG's activities were still primarily focused on the natural resource management (NRM) aspects of farming, however from 2012 this focus shifted, with the group partnering with DAFWA to undertake a non-wetting soils project. This shift was further amplified in 2013 when the Northern Agricultural Catchments Council (NACC), the group's primary source of project funding, moved from a model which was heavily reliant on subcontracting projects to grower groups, to a system where NACC sought to undertake a larger number of projects in-house. As a result WMG's project funding mix fundamentally shifted, moving from 80 percent of its activities being focused around NRM, to less than 15 percent in a short period of time.

The group is still undergoing significant change with an ever expanding membership base, as well as a push in to areas not normally associated with wheatbelt based grower groups. The most apt example of this is the establishment of the Potato Committee in January 2015. The establishment of this committee highlights the region's unique position of having both productive dryland and irrigated agricultural enterprises.

## West Midlands Group Strategic Direction

The group now not only focuses on delivering relevant, professional and innovative research to their membership base but also seeks to be a voice for growers in the local area. According to WMG Executive Officer Anne Wilkins, the group sees itself as a platform for members to represent their views on issues on local agricultural and community issues. "We [WMG Staff] may not know the answer to an issue raised by a grower but due to the group's extensive networks we [the group] are able to direct an enquiry in the right direction to ensure that it is addressed appropriately," said Anne.

The group's direction and scope of activities are driven from WMG's strategic plan. The plan sets out the group's research priorities in each of its program areas as well as WMG's overarching mission, to deliver relevant professional and innovative representation and research to its members. The plan is reviewed every three years.

## Membership

The group has around 120 farming business members, which represents around 230 growers and 44% of the farm ownership in the area. WMG group also has agreements with the Mingenew Irwin Group and Evergreen Farming that allow WMG members access to various members-only publications and events.

As the group has transformed significantly since 2012, so has its membership base. For example, as the group has expanded, the proportion of members hailing from Badgingarra has dropped by around 30 percent. This is due to membership numbers increasing in other shires rather than representing a decline in members from the Badgingarra Shire.

## Board Structure

The WMG board has seven members who are skilled based and represent the local region. There are four subcommittees which is chaired by a WMG board member. The board sets the strategic direction ensuring that the group's activities are aligned with the strategic plan but also enabling the group to respond to the issues as they arise. The board also plays an integral role in making critical decisions around how the group functions, such as; employing new staff, large issues that will affect the group's wider membership base and decisions around the group moving in to new areas (such as the establishment of the potato committee). According to Anne, the Executive Officer will also approach the board for advice regarding specific issues to ensure the group's response to a particular issue is reflective of the majority of the member's views.

## West Midlands Group Research Program

In terms of group operations, WMG group divides its activities up into five program areas; cropping research and development, livestock research and development, potatoes, finance and women's interests. There are approximately 10 people on each subcommittee including WMG members and industry. These committees operate with a high degree of autonomy working independently from the board. The subcommittees play a lead role in outlining and investigating issues in their focus area as well as setting trial and research priorities.

Currently the group separates its research priorities into its main program areas, with the majority of WMG's research activities being focused around grains and livestock. The group's grains research priorities focus mainly around the mitigation of soil constraints; non-wetting soils, sub soil acidity and compaction issues. The livestock program is currently focusing on issues around animal welfare and farm business benchmarking.

## Staffing Model

Executing the board's strategic direction is four FTE staff, who focus on the implementation of day to day activities of the group. These staff include an Executive Officer, Communication's Officer, part-time Finance Officer and a recently appointed Marketing and Business Development Manager. In addition to these core staff, the group will seek to engage experts for specific activities on a contract basis.

## Funding Sources

This ability for WMG to remain flexible is critical to the group's long term sustainability. The group is heavily reliant on project and sponsorship funding, which generally do not extend beyond a three year timeframe. Currently the group receives around 52% of its funding through projects, 30% through sponsorship, 12% from the lease of the Badgingarra Research Station and 6% from membership. Anne recognises this funding model represents a risk to the group's long term sustainability and is actively looking into other avenues to diversify their funding base.

When engaging in sponsorship agreements, WMG sees it essential to target sponsors that have regional relevance and will always seek to develop sponsorship agreements that provide clear benefits to the group and sponsors. According to Anne the group would ultimately turn away a sponsorship offer if they did not believe the sponsor represented values that were not aligned with the group's interests.

In addition to sponsorship, the group receives a large amount of in-kind support. This includes WMG Ambassadors Dr Bill Bowden and Dr Bryon Micke who actively contribute their time and expertise to the group's grains and livestock R&D programs respectively. As well as the WMG ambassadors the group's Finance Committee Chairperson Kieran Sullivan is a practicing accountant who donates his professional expertise. In addition to these individuals the group also maintains a strong relationship with DAFWA, who support WMG through providing access to researchers whose work aligns with the group's primary research priorities.

## Future Opportunities & Challenges

Looking forward, the primary challenge for the group is to maintain its current level of funding. Ideally the group would like to develop a long term funding model that is not solely reliant on project and sponsorship funding. In regards to the direction of the group's future activities, Anne Wilkins would like to see the group have more of a presence in the livestock sector and be well positioned to support continued development of the horticulture industry in the West Midlands area.

# Women in Farming Enterprises

## Contact Details:

Anna-Lisa Newman,  
T: 9874 7032, E: admin@karradale.com



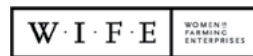
WIFE West Arthur



WIFE Varley

## Women in Farming Enterprises Fact File:

- Membership: 116 individual members across five regional branches
- The group has an executive committee with 7 members this committee is call WIFE Inc
- Each branch has its own committee and drives its own activities with support from WIFE Inc
- The group has no core sponsorship and only receives sponsorship for specific events.



## Background & History

Women in Farming Enterprises (WIFE Inc.) is a regionally based farming systems organisation that was born out of kitchen table discussions in and around Varley about some of the more challenging aspects of running a farm business.

From these first informal meetings in 2009, the group sought to develop a model to provide women who were involved in a farming business an opportunity to connect with each other, share their experiences and build their capacity. Over the following years the group became more structured and meetings became more regular, where eventually the group started to gain more confidence in its direction and started inviting new members. In 2012 WIFE Inc. held its inaugural annual seminar which marked the launch of what the group is today.

The 2012 seminar aimed to tackle big issues that were reoccurring at the groups' initial meetings, such as human resource management and how to run your farm business in a strategic manner to ensure long term profitability. The seminar also provided the group with the ability to seek sponsorship and promote its self to the wider community.

As a result of the 2012 seminar the group gained state wide exposure and started getting enquires from throughout the wheatbelt about how other areas could develop a group similar to WIFE Inc. According to WIFE Inc. Chair Anna-Lisa Newman, the committee was excited to share the concept they had developed but on the other hand were concerned about providing support and then losing the connection to the original WIFE group.

## Membership Structure

To ensure this connection remained the group developed the idea of having independent branches under the WIFE banner. These branches would then be incorporated into WIFE's governance structure, and thus removing some administrative barriers that these group would have otherwise faced.

Initially WIFE developed an information package outlining how the organisation functioned and the steps involved in setting up a new branch, however these information packages did not gain much traction. Instead one of the WIFE committee members volunteered to go out to these groups and talk to them about what WIFE could offer and help with the initial setup of the branch. This model was highly successful with the group now having 5 branches in Varley, Lake Grace, Ongerup, Cranbrook and West Arthur that service 116 members.

## Board Structure

Now the group is structured in a way not dissimilar to a franchise, with an overarching committee called WIFE Inc. providing the brand, the overarching governance structure and other systems such as accounting and data sharing processes. Each regional branch operates independently and contributes a portion of their membership fees to WIFE Inc. There are currently seven members who sit on the WIFE Inc. committee, who are mostly drawn from the original Varley WIFE branch, however as the various regional branches become established it is envisioned that there will be a representative from each branch sitting on the WIFE Inc. committee. Whilst many of the WIFE branch committee's mainly consist of farming business partners the organisation welcomes anyone with an interest in farming or rural agribusiness.

## WIFE's Strategic Direction

Driving the WIFE network's activities is the overarching vision is that "all Women with a desire to contribute to farming business can help to improve farm profitability and sustainability of businesses".

The key messages that sit with this vision include –

- Women are able to transfer prior learning and skills to farm business frame works and offer new perspectives and management styles
- Through providing opportunities to help build capacity and knowledge of women WIFE can contribute to the future of farming in Australia
- Flexible and innovative approaches to professional development in farm business can contribute to a farms profitability.
- WIFE aims to act as a conduit to connect women to the many available programs and organisations designed to support farm business.

From this vision and key messages stems the strategy that demonstrates the then current (2013) focus of the organisation.

To achieve these strategic objectives, the WIFE network seeks to provide a forum where members can talk openly about their successes and challenges as well as share potential solutions to common farm business issues.

## Funding Sources

The group does not receive a large amount of in kind support, other than some pro bono accounting assistance provided free of charge from a private accountant in Lake Grace to assist the group in setting up a MYOB accounting system. As the group moves forward they would like to develop further relationships with other local community organisations and grower groups, and currently WIFE is in the process of developing a plan to engage in long term sponsorship agreements. "WIFE is looking forward to exploring sponsorship partners to assist in the financial funding of the WIFE organisation, as the mutual benefit for members and industry is exciting," Anna-Lisa said.

## Future Opportunities & Challenges

One of the challenges the group has faced as it has grown is trying to manage assumptions people make about the organisation, "there is no real criteria for becoming a member, we are open to everyone who is involved in the farm business, despite what people think you don't have to be married or even directly employed on farm to get benefit from the group," says Anna-Lisa.

That being said, the majority of the group's members sit in the 25-44 year old age bracket, many of whom have recently moved to a new community and are starting to get involved in the administrative side of the farm business. Many of the branches still have older members as well, who according to Anna-Lisa provide a valuable perspective especially around sensitive issues such as succession planning.

As the group has continued to expand there is a real concern that the WIFE Inc. committee will not have the capacity to continue to manage the day to day activities of the group. To ensure that the networks capacity is maintained over the long term the group is investigating funding avenues that will enable them to employ a part time coordinator to ensure that the administrative side of the organisation is kept under control.

Despite the current lack of empirical evidence of the impact WIFE is having there is plenty of anecdotal feedback gained from the various seminars and workshops the group has run. The feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, with attendees commenting on how the group has empowered them to make changes to their farming business and the recognition WIFE gives the role woman play in farm business.

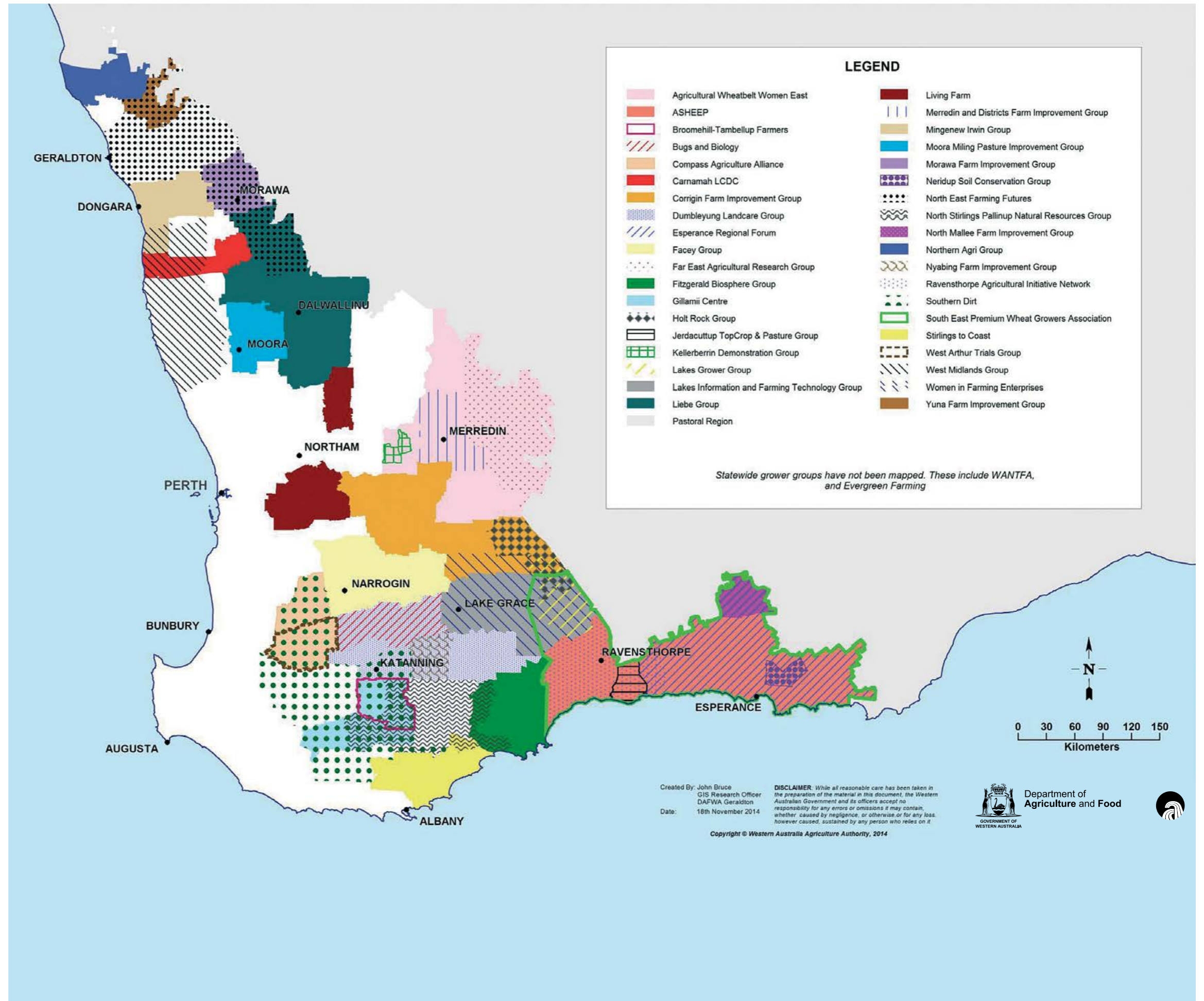
In the future, WIFE would ideally see itself still delivering what it had initially set out to but with an increased capacity to support a large number of branches throughout WA, and potentially nationally.





# Grower Group Alliance

## Member Groups Location and Coverage



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