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Producer survey results used to direct extension efforts and increase adoption in south west Queensland: a GrazingFutures case study

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GrazingFutures (GF) is an extension project funded by the Queensland Government and the Drought and Climate Adaption Program focussed on improving business management and drought resilience of extensive livestock producers in western Queensland. Western Queensland has a highly variable climate and since 2013 the south west has been subject to almost continuous drought declarations (Bowen and Chudleigh 2021). Despite these prevailing drought conditions graziers have successfully implemented practice changes supported by GF that have better equipped their businesses to prepare for, respond to and recover from drought (Rolfe *et al.* 2020). A small sample of south west Queensland producers were surveyed, with the objective of the survey to provide insights from producers, known to have made a recent practice change, so the GF team could direct their extension efforts and improve adoption of recommended practices.

Eleven graziers from six properties were surveyed on property in person by GR Consulting in 2021. These graziers reflected upon the practice changes they had made within their businesses and the resources they used when considering and implementing the change. The qualitative surveying method was designed to allow producers to provide their responses in an in-depth conversational manner. Five topics were focused on in the survey: (1) sources of support when changing a practice; (2) service provider support other than workshop type activities; (3) business management skills; (4) drought preparedness; and (5) early weaning. The below results focus on two of the surveyed topics, business management and drought preparedness because of their relevance to grazing business success in the Australian rangelands.

All graziers surveyed rated business skills at the highest rating of 'Very important', often describing them as critical to their business's success. Furthermore, all producers said they would like to receive more support to build upon their current business skills. A skill referred to was to better understand and use information in their business activity statements (BAS) to learn more about their businesses financial position. Other skills were bookkeeping, payroll management, and financial planning. The skills that these producers were seeking were indicative of their challenges in business management. Half (50%) of the properties surveyed said they found no aspects of business management to be holding their business back. That indicates at least 50% believe their current business capabilities hold them back.

When asked about drought preparedness, only 50% of the businesses surveyed rated themselves as well prepared for drought with the remaining 50% rating themselves as poorly prepared or not prepared at all. The level of preparedness was rated on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 10 (very much), with a rating of >7 being the marker level of a practical standard of drought preparation. The topics mentioned as most critical for being drought prepared included having finances in order and available, being able to realistically manage available feed as well as improvements in property infrastructure. Five of the six businesses commented that they wanted to be better prepared for future droughts by changing aspects of their previous drought management, these changes correlate with the topics listed above. Surveyed producers were asked what support could be provided by service providers to assist when implementing practice change. Providing new information on management topics and technologies was mentioned most, followed by ongoing support or follow-up after the event was completed.

The GF project team have used these report findings to direct extension efforts in two main ways. Firstly, the team is focussing efforts on delivering follow-up to graziers, rather than holding additional events, as a method to deliver new information and support practice change. Planned follow-up methods include phone calls, face to face and small group sessions. Event numbers have been reduced and appropriate time has been allocated in formal workplans to ensure follow-up is completed. Secondly, business literacy skills are being prioritised as well as the continuation of already established business groups, with plans to deliver information on bookkeeping, interpreting BAS, and payroll management. Whilst the sample size of these surveys was small, the results offered relevant local leads which were used to inform the GF approach to support on ground practice change. It is recommended that similar surveys should continue in the future to help direct project efforts and improve adoption of practice change.

References:

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