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TO BE, OR NOT TO BE, THAT IS THE QUESTION – IN A GROUP THAT IS

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Abstract

There is a perception in Western Australia that some regions do not have many farmer groups and that there are large numbers of farmers who aren't involved with group activities. This was seen to be a problem for government and industry research organisations that are attempting to encourage change in rural communities through group processes. This perception was not supported by the results of a study of in which 172 south western grain belt farmers were surveyed at three major field days in WA during 2002.

With 79% of those surveyed currently involved in an average of 1.7 farmer groups, it can be argued they are heavily involved with group activities. Interestingly older farmers tended to be involved in more groups. Those that are involved in groups do so to gain information, social interaction and to improve themselves, their enterprise and the community; whereas those not involved said they have other sources of information, limited time and the groups offered were not perceived to be applicable. Another trend emerging in WA is the increasing role and membership of farmer initiated and managed groups.

Introduction

This project was a preliminary study of grower participation in groups located in the southwestern grain belt (SWGB) of Western Australia (WA). The study was initiated by former TOPCROP West state coordinator Tresslyn Walmsley, who felt that large numbers of farmers were not involving themselves in group activities. This was seen to be a problem for government and industry research organisations that are attempting to encourage change in rural communities through group processes. Walmsley also felt that the formation of groups was geographically concentrated in some areas and even in areas where there were many groups, some farmers still did not participate and it was not clear why this was so.

The aim of this project was to determine factors currently affecting farmer involvement in group activities in the SWGB of WA. The objectives were to determine:

- The level of farmer participation in groups;
- If farmer group membership is concentrated in certain areas;
- Why farmers do/do not participate in groups; and
- If the characteristics of farmers influence participation.

It was felt that by determining the geographic distribution of groups, participation of growers in groups and growers' perceptions of groups; those disseminating information to the growers in the SWGB of WA will be able to structure their extension programs to better suit the needs of their target audiences.

The study was conducted in three main stages: a review of literature; a focus group on extension professionals; and a survey of farmers from the SWGB.

Review of literature

The review of literature covered a brief background of agriculture in WA, which set the scene for describing the development of Australian agricultural extension; particularly the progression of pedagogical extension approaches to andragogical approaches that integrate groups (see Horne (2002) for the details of this review). Groups and participation were then defined in order to examine the individual and group characteristics that influence group participation, in effect investigating why some group-based approaches are not meeting the expectations of those involved in extension today. Individual characteristics influencing participation were found to include learning styles, attitude, socio-cultural background, farming style, role and perception of group benefits. Group characteristics influencing participation included: prestige, climate, degree of interaction between members, physical size, setting (distance) and perceived success.

A number of hypotheses arose from the literature review and informal discussion with TOPCROP West state coordinators. These included:

- Grower and group characteristics influence farmer group participation
- Farmer groups are not spread evenly throughout the SWGB of WA

From here, it was necessary to conduct further exploratory research regarding what characteristics of individual participants and groups are likely to affect group participation throughout the SWGB of WA. By exploring these characteristics, a formal survey of the relevant sample was developed to gain quantitative data on the factors currently affecting farmer involvement in group activities.

Focus group

A focus group was held involving seven professionals directly involved in rural extension (while we had hoped more would attend, only seven people were available). It was felt that by studying professional extension officers to openly discuss questions based on the research objectives; the findings of the literature review could be more specifically applied to the SWGB of WA, thus allowing the generation of a more applicable quantitative research. Questions included:

1. What do you feel are the reasons why farmers do not involve themselves in groups?
2. What do you feel are the reasons why farmers involve themselves in groups?
3. How would you describe the farmers that do not participate in groups?
4. How would you describe the farmers that participate in groups?
5. Do you think grower participation in groups is spread evenly throughout the SWGB of WA – is there more or less participation in certain areas?
6. What comments have you heard from farmers about what they think about different groups in the SWGB of WA, ie. What are their perceptions of groups?

From the focus group, it was hypothesised that: too many groups being available, limited time, cost, social boundaries, distance to meetings and growers not wishing to share enterprise information were key group and individual characteristics that lead to limited participation. It was thought that higher group membership would be found in the younger generation and that grower participation and groups were spread unevenly across SWGB of WA. Finally, it was felt that there were no easily identifiable differences in individual characteristics between growers who do or do not participate in farmer groups. The key findings of the focus groups and subsequent hypotheses shaped the development of the grower survey, which utilised open questions due to the inconclusive focus group results.

Grower survey

A survey of 172 growers at three key agricultural events in the SWGB of WA provided the quantitative data for this project. It was felt that by surveying growers in person a more favourable response rate would be generated, in addition to minimising bias (Malhotra 1999). Surveys were completed at the Dowerin GWN Field Days (August 27-29) (68 surveys), Newdegate Machinery Field Days (September 4-5) (53 surveys) and Mingenew Lions Expo (September 19-20) (53 surveys). The Dowerin GWN Field Days had over 58 000 visitors, Newdegate Machinery Field Days 14 500 and Mingenew Lions Expo 9 000 (personal communication with event organisers). With such a large target population, these key events provided accessible venues, offering a large sample at a time favourable to this project. Even so, bias was still present due to the sample being a field day sample.

The questionnaire covered the level of farmer participation, farmer group distribution, farmer perceptions of groups and the characteristics of farmers. It began with a brief introduction, followed by several easily answered questions regarding the grower's enterprise, then questions regarding the growers involvement in groups and 16 attitudinal questions based on Soutar and Clarke (1981) lifestyle questions adapted to the context of farming. The survey was pre-tested several times and conducted at the three field days in a 'random' 'physical' manner, sampling without replacement (Malhotra 1999).

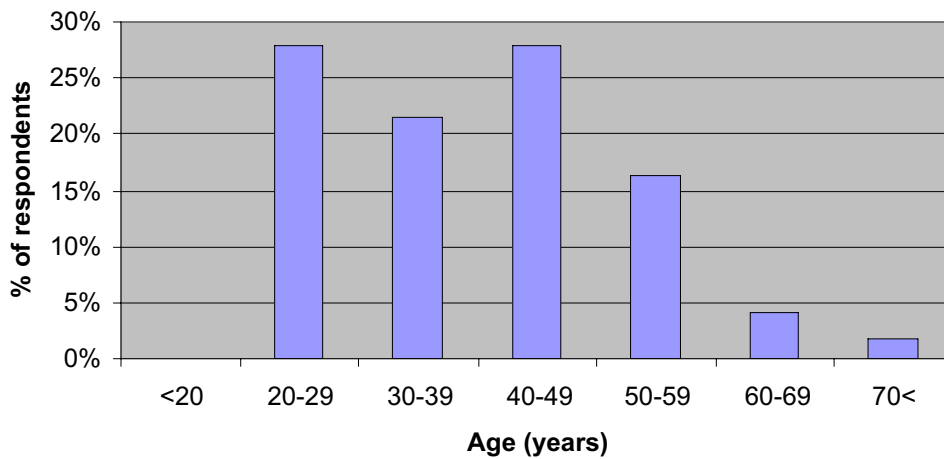
Results

Because the study is based on samples of growers attending large regional field days, care should be taken in generalising the results to the wider SWGB region. The results of the grower survey are presented with regard to the research objectives.

Characteristics of sample

The growers surveyed are representative of the grain belt area geographically and in terms of how their enterprise is classified, however the sample was younger and contained more males (89%) than normal for grain belt farmers (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Age of sampled grower population



In summary, the profile of an average grower surveyed is male and aged between 20 and 49. They farm cereal grains and sheep in the grain belt and are a current member of a group.

Attitudes and interests

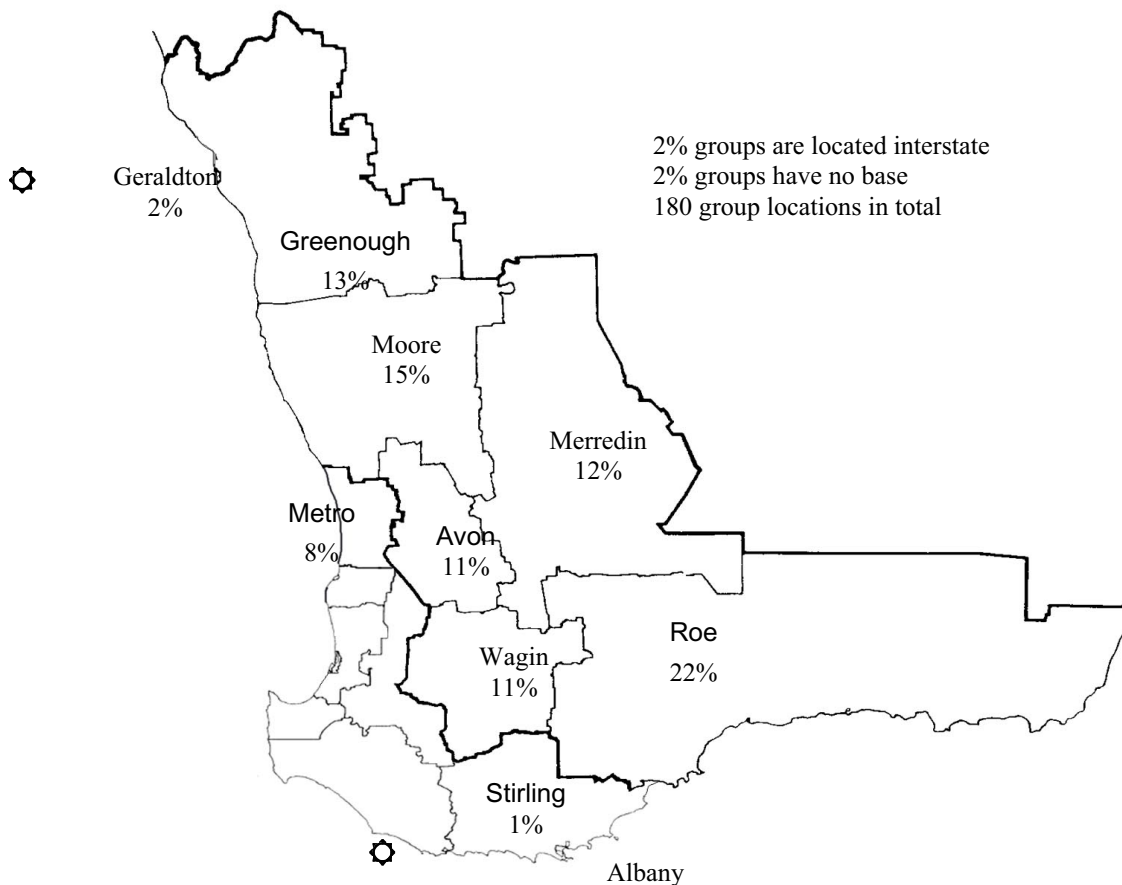
Growers were asked 16 attitudinal questions based on a Likert scale. No conclusive results were found to support any substantial relationships between attitudes and group membership or participation. This supports the views of those attending the focus group.

Distribution of grower groups

The typical group characterised in this research is located in the SWGB area of WA and its participants located in the same electoral district.

This study did not find any evidence to support the hypothesis that groups were localised geographically. The district of Moore had the highest mean number of group memberships and Wagin the lowest compared to other electoral districts in the SWGB of WA (Figure 2), but this could be partly due to sample error and field day sample bias. Despite this, it appears farmer groups are spread evenly across the southwestern grain belt of WA.

Figure 2: Frequency of groups located in each electoral district across South West WA

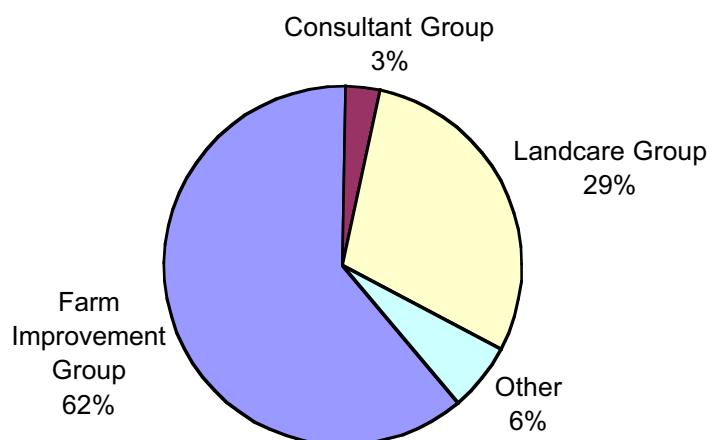


Source: Map adapted from J. Harbord 2002, pers. comm. on behalf of Western Australian Electoral Commission

Grower group participation level

The average grower is currently a Member of a Farm Improvement group and/or a Landcare group and travelled 78km to attend 3.7 meetings last year (Figure 3). He has also been a past member of a Government Supported, Large Farmer Run and Agribusiness Supported group.

Figure 3: Percent of current membership in each group type



259 valid cases

The findings of this study suggest that growers are involved in groups to a substantial degree, failing to support the hypothesis that many farmers weren't involved in groups.

Grower perceptions of groups

The average grower finds Field days and Field tours to be the most useful activities of the groups he is involved in and feels that Information, Improvement and Interaction are the main benefits of being in the group. He feels that the groups he is involved in are slightly less successful in providing Information and Improvement than expected but Interaction outdoes his expectations by nearly a whole rating on a seven-point scale.

He feels that others aren't involved in the groups he attends due to them having Different ideology, no Time and the group being Irrelevant to them. He left the groups he was a past member of due to having Other sources of information, Time restraints and the group becoming Not applicable.

Research limitations and further research

The research had a number of limitations deriving from time limitation which had their biggest impact on survey design and implementation. Due to the survey being conducted in person at field days, one of the greatest limitations on questionnaire design was completion time. As a result, the questionnaire needed to be highly structured; ensuring relevant answers were gained quickly and easily. Conducting the questionnaire at field days could also have biased the sample, however any the other possible sampling methods would have incurred some degree of bias but would also have been time consuming.

There is a wide scope for further research. Firstly, there could be further study of growers and these key factors regarding grower involvement. Further investigation of group distribution and the reasons for any localisation in the SWGB of WA would be useful seeing this study did not find any localisation while focus group attendants felt there was localisation. More detailed research into grower's perceptions of farmer groups would also be useful and the group benefits found here could also be tested in a further study. Further research in farmer styles and attitudinal characteristics that influence group participation may be necessary, in addition to the investigation of satisfaction of non group members with their sources of information, and how groups could be made more applicable to those in the area.

Conclusion

Being a preliminary study of grower participation in groups located in the south-western grain belt of Western Australia, this project was intended to act as a precursor to developing strategies for involving more farmers in groups and facilitating access to information services to non group members. However, the findings of this study suggest that growers are already involved in grower groups to a substantial level and the reasons why some growers are not involved in groups are because they have other sources of information, limited time and the groups offered are not perceived to be applicable. These findings need to be confirmed, but they suggest that the concerns about missing out on a large number of non-group members may be misplaced.

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Biographical Sketch

Renaye has recently graduated with a Bachelor Agribusiness (Marketing) from Muresk Institute of Agriculture, Curtin University of Technology in Western Australia. She completed her honours project (detailed in this paper) last year, and was awarded first class honours. Further to her degree, Renaye is keen to pursue a career in agriculture.

Roy is Senior Lecturer in Farm Management and Agricultural Extension at the Muresk Institute, Curtin University of Technology in Western Australia. Apart from WA he has worked in NSW, USA, and the South Pacific (lecturing in agricultural extension) and Tasmania (as an extension officer). Roy has more recently been involved in projects in South Africa and the Philippines as well as WA and Qld. His research interests are in the application of soft and hard systems approaches to issues of decision making, adoption and rural development and it is the interest in this latter issue that led to his work on collaborative groups and cooperatives. His undergraduate training was in Rural Science (UNE) with postgraduate training in Agricultural Economics (Cornell - MSc; UNE - PhD) and a Grad Dip in Agricultural Extension from Melbourne.