Different segments of the Western Australian farming community prefer different extension tools when searching for cropping information from the Department of Agriculture and Food

Cindy Parsons

Department of Agriculture and Food, 10 Doney Street, Narrogin, Western Australia, 6312
Email: cindy.parsons@agric.wa.gov.au

Abstract. Members of the Department of Agriculture and Food WA (DAFWA) farming systems project surveyed experienced growers, less experienced growers, agronomists and consultants in the central agricultural region of Western Australia to investigate whether DAFWA is still a primary source of cropping information. The survey results indicate DAFWA is a primary cropping information source for all categories except for the less experienced growers who primarily use their local agronomists. Agronomists, consultants and less experienced growers prefer to download Farmnotes and bulletins and use DAFWA's website when they are actively seeking cropping information. Experienced growers prefer a hard copy of the information, rather than using DAFWA's website. Experienced and less experienced growers also prefer to directly phone DAFWA staff. Agmemo newsletters, PestFax and field day publications are other DAFWA publications used by all categories when actively seeking cropping information.

Key words: Survey, crop information sources, central agricultural region, cropping stakeholders

Background

The Department of Agriculture and Food's farming systems project had received reports from a group of growers at a workshop that they felt some growers were unaware of where to find relevant cropping information. These growers were also concerned there was a newer generation of growers coming on to the farming scene that were not getting the opportunity to learn about basic cropping information, as their predecessors did under DAFWA's TopCrop and other cropping extension programs, or perhaps that the less experienced growers felt that DAFWA was not the right place to search for this information and referred to their local agronomists first. Basic cropping information refers to information about type of crop, choice of variety, sowing time, sowing rate and crop agronomy.

Aims

The aim of this investigation was to verify whether experienced grain growers, less experienced growers and other stakeholders actively sought information about the cropping basics by conducting a one-on-one survey. This survey was also intended to investigate the validity of the assumptions that the newer generation may not be aware of existing crop production packages, or that they felt they did not need to search for this information, or perhaps they didn't view DAFWA as a useful source of cropping information. Hence there was a need to check whether growers still used DAFWA when actively searching for information and to identify what DAFWA information resources were preferred by different segments of the farming community. There was also the need to investigate if it was worthwhile to continue updating these DAFWA resources with the latest information.

Method

Structured phone interviews, using a standard survey, for different categories of crop information users were conducted to investigate:

- What cropping information was still actively being sought?
- Who they received their information from and if information was sourced from DAFWA, what resources were used?
- Were hard copies or electronic department publications preferred? What other DAFWA publications were referred to?
- How easy was it to navigate around DAFWA's website and how successful were they in finding cropping packages?
- If DAFWA produced hard copies and electronic versions of cropping information packages that were updated and included current technology, would they be referred to?

Relevant stakeholders were identified and categorised by DAFWA staff in an attempt to identify any trends or differences that may exist between each category in terms of who was searching and what was their use of cropping information. The categories selected were: experienced

growers (had been growing crops for more than five years), less experienced or new growers (had five years or less cropping experience), farm consultants and crop agronomists.

Members of DAFWA's farming system project surveyed 15 experienced growers, 12 less experienced growers, nine agronomists and eight consultants across the central agricultural region in Western Australia.

Summary of results

What cropping information was still actively being sought?

All surveyed participants, except for consultants, actively sought information about herbicide rates and compatibility from DAFWA. Information about choice of crop was the least actively sought information by all categories. For consultants, choice of variety and fertiliser requirements was the most actively sought-after topics while the choice of crop was the least. Experienced growers reported herbicide rates and compatibility information was the most actively sought topic, while choice of crop and sowing depth was the least. Less experienced growers sought information about herbicide rates and compatibility while choice of crop and seeding rate information was the least actively sought. Agronomists most actively sought information for choice of variety, time of sowing and sowing depth, in addition to herbicide rates and compatibility. Information for choice of crop, fertiliser requirements and seeding rates was the least actively sought.

Where was information sourced from?

All survey participants, except for the less experienced growers, used DAFWA as their main source of information. Less experienced growers used private agronomists as their main source of information. Other sources of information for the survey participants were consultants, agronomists, neighbours, rural newspapers, radio and researchers.

If information was sourced from DAFWA, what resources were used?

Agronomists, consultants and less experienced growers that used DAFWA as a source of information, primarily used DAFWA's website. For experienced growers, the least favoured approach for finding information was using DAFWA's website. This might be because experienced growers have learnt over the years who the specialist in the different cropping fields is, and who to call directly for information. Less experienced growers also like to directly telephone DAFWA staff for cropping information. Only one out of seven consultants said they used DAFWA's phone information service, AgLine, and none of the agronomists interviewed said they had used AgLine when wanting cropping information.

Were hard copies or electronic DAFWA publications preferred? What other DAFWA publications were used?

Agronomists, consultants and less experienced growers preferred to download Farmnotes and bulletins from the website when accessing DAFWA information. Unsurprisingly, experienced growers preferred hard copy DAFWA publications compared to downloading electronic publications. The other stakeholder categories also liked to refer to hard copy publications. Agmemo newsletters, PestFax newsletters and field days were other DAFWA information sources also used.

How easy was it to navigate around DAFWA's website and how successful were they in finding cropping packages?

The majority of the interviewed consultants, less experienced growers and agronomists that used DAFWA's website said when they conducted online searches for cropping information, they were able to find suitable, succinct information packages. For the experienced growers that used the website, just over half felt that searching did not produce good results.

If DAFWA produced hard copies and electronic versions of cropping information packages that were updated and included current technology, would they be referred to?

The majority of respondents, regardless of which category they were in, agreed that if DAFWA produced or updated available cropping packages they would refer to them. Some interviewees voiced their preference for more specific cropping packages about herbicides in addition to requesting that information or recommendations are tried and tested before they are published. The other influencing factor as to whether interviewees would refer to these packages was if there was a cost involved in purchasing certain publications.

Conclusion

DAFWA is still a primary source of information for experienced grain growers, agronomists and consultants who actively seek cropping information in Western Australia. The survey revealed that the less experienced growers usually refer to their local agronomist first for cropping information, but they also use DAFWA's website. This indicates that for less experienced growers, consultants and agronomists, cropping information needs to be easy to find on DAFWA's website or distributed through electronic newsletters and emails. In contrast, continuing to provide information in a hardcopy format is more effective for extending cropping information to experienced growers.

Acknowledgements

Fellow farming systems project team members: Chris Schelfhout, Vanessa Stone and Tom Sweeny and participating growers, agronomists and consultants.