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**THE AUSTRALIAN FARM BUSINESS MANAGEMENT NETWORK:
INDUSTRY, EDUCATION, CONSULTANCY AND RESEARCH COMING TOGETHER**

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Abstract

Under the sponsorship of the University of Sydney, on 5-6th December 2002 the future of farm management in Australia was discussed. The fundamental conclusion achieved by key primary industry representatives, corporate executives, academics, consultants and researchers is that farm management will have a more significant role to play in the future than previously in servicing the primary sector. The idea of farm management as a profession was proposed. Its basis would be *business management* supported by farming systems and technology, and using an holistic approach to action (i.e. finance, people and environment). The new profession of *Farm Business Management* would seek to influence education, research, consultancy and extension in Australia.

Interested parties participating of the 2002 National Farm Management Workshop came away with the idea of championing a consultative network, constituted by interested institutions and interested individuals, as a first step in the process of nurturing the future development of farm business management. By integrating farmers and academics with corporate executives, consultants and researchers the objective is to behave as a consultative group. This group will influence educational models, implement consultancy and research strategies, and network in social and professional terms. Moreover, this network will provide a systematic opportunity for the channelling of farm business management and farming systems related information at different levels for education, extension and scientific purposes. This network is called the **Australian Farm Business Management Network (AFBMnetwork)**.

Introduction

Through the organisation of an open debate in 2002, the University of Sydney attempted to achieve a dramatic impact in the future of farm management in Australia. The hypothesis behind this exercise was that farmers are facing an increasing lack of suitable formal training opportunities. Academic models were not compatible with current needs and perspectives of farming. Farm business consultancy was not serving farming well and there was a constrained supply of research funding (Charry and Parton, 2002).

Complementary to the above Kemp, Michalk and Charry (2002) have argued that long-term sustainable farming system models need to be implemented within a 4-dimensional perspective that includes financial/economic, ecological/environmental/biophysical, social/human and dynamic time indicators. Moreover, Mullins (1976) analysis of the Australian environmental crisis suggests the need for implementation of adequate environmental management systems.

Charry, Cox, Parton, Crockett, Johnson, Bone and Whiteley (2003) summarised the outcomes of this national forum highlighting the readiness to step forward, in organisational terms, from the different sectors that constitute the farm business management profession. The general objectives are to implement actions that will create new perceptions and new opportunities for "professional" farmers.

A Reference Framework for Professional Integration

The issue of isolation and lack of integration amongst farm business management practitioners is one reason for the tardiness in the profession's development. As such, a networking organisation was proposed to bring together professional farmers, industry leaders, corporate agribusiness managers, academics, farm business consultants, extension officers and researchers. The limitations of previous organisational forms were highlighted by Charry and Parton (2002) in order to avoid these pitfalls and redirect the new network.

The suggested name for this organisation is **The Australian Farm Business Management Network (AFBMNetwork)**.

AFBMNetwork will be an organisation working for the professional interest of individuals and organisations involved in farm business management and farming systems. It will act as a consultative group to the outside world and will behave as a servicing organisation to its members. Its headquarters will initially be located at The University of Sydney, Faculty of Rural Management, Orange, NSW 2800. Its operational structure will start with a Steering Committee constituted by volunteers (i.e. executive and advisory members) coming from the different sectors and areas of action of farm business management and farming systems. Its main means of communication will be online (with a website, i.e. <http://www.orange.usyd.edu.au/afbmnetwork.htm>; and an email address i.e., afbmnetwork@orange.usyd.edu.au) under the

umbrella of the University of Sydney, Orange campus. The web-page will eventually contain member profiles, a research window, consultancy window, education window, discussion &/or working papers window, a periodical newsletter (i.e. *AFBMNetwork Newsletter*), an extension online journal (i.e. *Farming Systems and Technology Journal*), and an online refereed journal (i.e. *Farm Business Management Online Refereed Journal*).

AFBMNetwork will initially work on establishing communication links and in the development of a strategic plan. An immediate target is the organisation of a bi-annual National Farm Business Management Conference. Within this national forum AFBM Network members will have the opportunity, not only to socially and professionally interact, but also to make decisions to ensure the future development of the network.

What follows is a summary description of initial reference points that will enable the further development of the AFBMNetwork.

AFBMNetwork Vision

To achieve excellence in Australian farm business management.

AFBMNetwork Mission

To ensure the creation of an innovative network of farm business management and farming systems related professionals and institutions that will promote education, research, consultancy and extension. A multiple bottom line perspective (i.e. financial, social, ecological and policy-making) is envisaged in the managing of the natural resources embedded in the agricultural production systems of Australia. AFBMNetwork aims to bring together individuals and organisational farm business management practitioners of Australia to strengthen them as a recognised professional group, and to better service the primary sector and its organisations in a consultative manner.

AFBMNetwork Goals

- 1 Gain professional recognition of farm business management in Australia.
- 2 Setting the standards of excellence for farm business management professional practice.
- 3 Mechanisms and opportunities for professional integration and professional organisation.
- 4 Encourage and support the creation of forums for discussion of issues of interest to members.
- 5 Disseminating extension and scientific information.
- 6 Encouraging the establishment of avenues for lifelong learning and professional development of farm business management and farming systems professionals.

AFBMNetwork Objectives

- 1 Exploring professional accreditation avenues for farm business management practice in Australia.
- 2 Encourage communication and co-operation among farm business management educational providers.
- 3 Encourage the development of research networks, and publicise research outcomes from members.
- 4 Implement lifelong learning opportunities for members.
- 5 Establish and disseminate servicing opportunities for members.

AFBMNetwork Strategies

- 1 Create, develop and sustain a network that integrates the farm business and farming systems related professionals of Australia through the establishment of a management Steering Committee, an operational Executive Office and a permanent online means of communication.
- 2 Implement an AFBMNetwork Strategic Plan within the first year of operation.
- 3 Organise a bi-annual Conference in farm business management for social interaction, professional networking and extension purposes starting in the year 2004/5(?).
- 4 Develop a web-page for AFBMNetwork with the support and assistance of The University of Sydney, Faculty of Rural Management.
- 5 Develop a quarterly online *AFBMNetwork Newsletter* to encourage cohesion among the group, and updating information on matters of interest to AFBMNetwork members.
- 6 Establish an online extension journal, i.e. *Farming Systems and Technology Journal* for AFBMNetwork members, and the wider farm business management, farming systems and agricultural technology community.
- 7 Establish a *Farm Business Management Online Refereed Journal* as a scientific publication avenue for AFBMNetwork members.
- 8 Establish partnerships with related professional organisations, communication and publication means for matters of information exchange on behalf of the AFBMNetwork members.
- 9 Create conditions for the development of specific networks in the areas of education and research.
- 10 Other issues that the Steering Committee considers as short-term priorities.

A situation audit should be conducted in the future to validate all the above statements and identify the issues and associated external factors from which better statements can be developed. The Steering Committee will conduct this situation audit to create a strategic direction paper. This document should also include a business structure and a governance policy for the organisation.

The Long-Term Perspective of AFBMNetwork

AFBMNetwork is a response to a perceived need to organise in a cohesive manner individuals and organisations that will look for a sustainable holistic development of the primary sector of Australia. Only professional farmers can be the real custodians of the land in some of the most fragile ecosystems of the planet. These professional farmers need the solidarity, empathy and the integrative support from individuals and organisations involved in education, research, extension and consultancy in farm business management; a statement that is compatible with Kingwell's (2002) arguments. This new framework is considered a suitable means to ensure the preservation and enhancement of biodiversity and ecosystems - an issue reinforced by Brennan and McCown (2001); while on the other hand the profitability of the farm businesses is sustained; the generation of the technology for the production systems is made available; and the well-being of individuals and communities surrounding the farming operation are ensured.

Nowadays, an essential condition is to reassure farmers that theirs is an occupation that demands a professional status, and that the natural resources of Australia should only be managed by accredited professionals. Within this context it is possible that dynamic models of education and research be implemented and strong consultancy schemes incorporating a holistic perspective be established.

The future of AFBMNetwork belongs to the decision-makers from the professional community dealing with holistic and sustainable solutions for the primary sector of Australia. AFBMNetwork will be a measure of the vision, and the perception of the mission from the managers and solution-finders of the natural resources and the agricultural production systems of Australia.

The University of Sydney, Curtin University of Technology-Muresk Institute, Marcus Oldham College as the founding organisations, and other institutions coming tomorrow, will lend their support through AFBMNetwork to what they perceive are essential issues to ensure a sustainable and balanced development of the agricultural sector in Australia.

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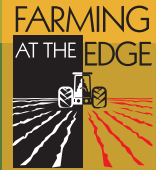
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