



Co-ops keep human capital balanced: research

Accountancy researcher Kay Plummer surveyed members from national, regional and local co-operatives and found the model useful for capacity building among the communities they serve.

She was addressing the topic at Australia's first forum on agricultural collectives this week.

The forum, at Kingscliff, NSW on August 29-30 also saw the launch of the \$14.9m Farm Co-operatives and Collaboration Pilot Program (FarmCCPP).

The program is an Australian Government investment providing farmers with knowledge and materials on co-operatives, collective bargaining and other forms of collaboration. Southern Cross University is administering the program nationally.

Speakers came from most Australian mainland states to share their knowledge on co-operative business models, collective marketing, governance, capital raising and collective bargaining. The keynote speaker was Jack Wilkinson Director, Co-operatives and Mutuals Canada.

Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Agriculture and Water Resources Barnaby Joyce said the national pilot program will allow farmers to work together to improve farmgate returns.

"Agricultural cooperatives allow farmers to own and control more of the food supply chain, which gives them more bargaining power when it comes to negotiating with buyers of their produce," Minister Joyce said.

"This pilot program has been developed to give farmers access to information and resources in a flexible, responsive and customised way and will focus on supporting farmers at a grassroots level.

"By allowing farmers to reach further down the supply chain, it gives them the ability to get better returns at the farm gate—it's that simple. It's better for the farmer, and it's better for local communities and the people who live and work there."

Ms Plummer led research involving 18 Australian co-operatives, including those with national, regional and local memberships. The participating co-ops ranged in size from 100 members to more than 500 members.

"We selected them to get a range of different co-ops from trading to non-trading co-ops, from not-for-profits to commercial operations. It was a purposeful sample, it was not random," she said. "The particular difference for co-ops is they connected really well



with the communities they were involved with. The communities saw the co-operative format as providing for the needs of their organisation better.

“Engagement with the co-operative principles of leadership and advocacy and wanting to educate people builds community capacity and passion and interest in the co-operative form.”

Beef producer and former NSW Rural Woman of the Year, Lorraine Gordon is FarmCCPP’s program director. “There are many and varied examples of successful collaboration in agriculture in Australia and there is potential for many more farmers to benefit from this way of doing business,” she said.

“For some farmers, collaborative business arrangements such as collaborative farming, cooperative marketing or bargaining collectively with other farmers can improve their position. Others may wish to consider moving up or down the supply chain by establishing buying or selling cooperatives. Collaboration with businesses beyond the farm gate can also create great value for farmers.”

Ben Roche, director of Southern Cross University’s engagement strategy said: “We have a strong track record in the two core elements of this program — agriculture and collaboration. We are delighted to be chosen to lead this important national program, which has the potential to transform regional Australia.”

ENDS

Caption: Lorraine Gordon: “Potential for farmers to benefit.”

To interview Ben Roche: 02 6620 3150

NOTE: Photo opps/interviews at press breakfast from 7.30-8.30am on August 29 at the Mantra on Salt Beach. Contact: Farm CCPP communications team leader, Sue Webster 0402 267 802