



Scholar's call for price-defying beef co-op

Beef producers need to look beyond current high returns and develop co-operatives to outlast future price downturns, according to a Queensland farmer and Churchill Foundation scholar.

Emma Robinson, who is also the 2016 Queensland Rural Women of the Year, has used the experience of her 2015 overseas study tour and funding providing through the RIRDC Rural Women's Award to form The Beef Co-op Project.

The project aims to promote the potential of co-operative business models to future-proof family farming.

"At the moment we have a window of opportunity in the beef industry," she said. "Only 18 months ago we had a massive sell-down at the low prices, and now we're on the flip side of that. It means that while some producers might not be as interested today because they're getting huge prices, most are looking long-term. They understand it's a supply/demand cycle that we ride."

She shared her vision 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 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."

The Charters Towers beef producer is anticipating working with existing meat processors to fine-tune value-added beef-based products. "Globally the demand for branded beef has outpaced commodity beef. This is also driving new supply chain relationships as product specifications become more tailored to different consumer tastes and expectations."

Emma sees the potential for co-operatives to reshape producer-processor relations and promote new synergies and efficiencies in the supply chain. She is also anticipating technology platforms will deliver more payback to family farms. Produce assurance and regional brandings "like grand wines" are also in her sights.

Her thoughts were among the many aired at the conference which attracted a capacity crowd to the Mantra on Salt Beach. Organisers allowed preferential bookings for farmers, existing and emerging farm groups as well as farm advisors and other service suppliers.

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."

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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