



Clever co-ops vision from international expert

Clever co-operatives pooling investment funds are high-priority for a visiting international expert.

Jack Wilkinson, Director of Co-operatives and Mutuals Canada shared his vision for clever co-op models 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 Ontario grain grower said co-ops had a resilience that outlasted economic downturns "because we have principles around our investment strategies'.

He continued: "After the 2008 economic collapse, co-ops did survive well and we are now regrouping. We are seeing the co-op model getting traction and flourishing once again. It is not a tired business model of the past, rather an exciting way to come together to meet future needs.



“Couldn’t we co-ordinate everyone’s initiative for capital funding in a much more co-ordinated fashion? That would be a huge deal if we put a pool together where we could support each other’s co-ops in a meaningful way. There’s a lot that could be done.”

He also argued that business courses around the world do not give enough air-time to the co-operative model. And the paucity of co-op know-how means a shortage of CEOs capable of understanding the model and its funding structures, he said. “We have to infiltrate the education system so that this is seen as a viable model. I think that is really critical.”

His 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.”

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