



Forum hears cropper's information-silo vision

A modern co-operative, where farmers harvest and store data, could lift technological gains in Australian agriculture, says a Victorian grains leader.

Chris Sounness, CEO of the Birchip Cropping Group, brought his vision of a data co-operative to Australia's first forum on agricultural collectives.

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."

From the cropping country of the Wimmera and Mallee, Chris Sounness shared his insights on collaborative e-commerce. He said that big data drawn from farm operations is a commodity worth collecting, and a co-op could be the structure to store it.

"At the moment farmers have got the data on the USB, on their harvester, in their head, in the notepad that's been through the washing machine, on their worker's phone or on their own phone which fell in the trough," he said. "How do you make any farmer



passionate about data collection? Currently they have to suffer compliance but that is rarely done with passion.

“Unless they’re passionate about it, ag technology won’t go far. We need to create an environment where they want to curate and it is rewarding.

“Maybe the farmers will be rewarded in some way for contributing data. The farmer has got to feel it leads to better decisions, they’ve got to feel it’s going to be worth their while,” he said.

Mr Sounness suggested that co-op members should be custodians of the data and its use may be best governed by contract law. “We all need education to ensure the farmers get the benefit of their efforts,” he added.

The concept was one of 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: 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