

SOCIAL RESEARCH FOR GRAIN & GRAZE

- a national project of the Grain & Graze Program



A couple on their mixed farm in WA's Northern Agricultural Region. The project will identify social factors influencing mixed farming decisions.

Social influences in mixed farming

Decision making on mixed farms is a complex process. Many factors are taken into account simultaneously, with finance, family, environment and risk all part of the mix.

This social research project will investigate the decision making processes from a people perspective and identify ways to help farmers make difficult decisions around managing mixed farming systems with more confidence.

Working closely with all nine Grain & Graze regions, the researchers seek to better understand how farmers learn and the criteria they use to make confident decisions and implement practice change.

This national project will inform other regional projects to ensure their research and extension activities consider the implications of social dimensions in farming decisions.

Types of decisions:

- Whether to increase or decrease livestock or crops
- Whether to increase or decrease the intensity of livestock or crops
- Whether to adopt a new technology in mixed farming

What do we hope to achieve?

Essentially, the project will quantify and qualify factors that influence mixed farmers' decisions, particularly decisions about changing their farming systems.

The project, coordinated by the Rendell McGuckian Consulting Group (RMCG), is set against acknowledged trends in mixed farming – the separation of the cropping and livestock enterprises and greater specialisation in one or the other, and a lack of appreciation by many farmers of the potential benefits of mixed farming systems.

In summary, the project will:

- Identify the factors influencing decisions to change practices and adopt different farming systems; and
- Help to make research and extension programs more relevant and consider the social aspects of decision making not just economics or environmental in isolation.

Grain & Graze farmers and advisers will help the RMCG researchers answer these questions:

1. What are the issues and barriers to change?
2. How are the social implications of on-farm change being managed and solutions applied?
3. How can farmers get the benefits of mixed farming and meet their goals?
4. How can we communicate effectively with farmers and develop relevant extension programs to support them to manage mixed farming systems change?

Some social issues:

- *Balancing work with family*
- *Access to, and managing, labour*
- *Strengthening regional communities*
- *Building confidence and pride*
- *Access to advice*



This research will lead to new knowledge about how farmers learn, make decisions and change farming practices.



By using a feedlot as part of his farming practice, this farmer has reduced the workload involved in managing his livestock.

How the project will work

The project will include a review of reports and literature as well as extensive interviews and focus groups with farmers. This will provide an opportunity for farmers to become involved across the nine project regions.

Interviews already conducted have confirmed that a common reaction to the increasing complexity of farming has been to simplify farming systems, sometimes by reducing the number of enterprises. The livestock component has often been sacrificed, with farmers citing labour difficulties, high workloads at critical times, a lack of skills, stress and less recreation time.

How can this help you?

Gaining insight into the complexity of the decision-making processes faced by mixed farmers will help researchers and advisers to provide the right support and information for farmers to move towards a more sustainable system.

Gaining a better understanding of farmer decision-making will help the Grain & Graze Program communicate more effectively with farmers and tailor research and extension activities accordingly.

This means that timely, relevant activities can be conducted which have maximum impact in terms of farmer learning and increased level of confidence in making the right decisions.

The researchers seek to better understand how farmers learn and the criteria they use to make confident decisions and implement practice change.



This national project will ensure Grain & Graze regional projects consider the social dimensions in farming decisions.

How can I find out more?

As results and recommendations emerge, Grain & Graze will plan a range of activities which will enable researchers, farmers, advisers and regional groups to adopt relevant project findings into practice.

For regional contacts or to sign up for the bimonthly Grain & Graze electronic newsletter, please visit www.grainandgraze.com.au.

Or you can contact the national social research project coordinator:

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THE GRAIN & GRAZE PROGRAM

Grain & Graze helps mixed farmers increase their profitability and social capital while better managing water, soils and biodiversity. The program works across nine regions in five states. Grain & Graze is a joint initiative of the Grains Research and Development Corporation, Meat and Livestock Australia, Australian Wool Innovation Ltd and Land & Water Australia.

www.grainandgraze.com.au