

Birchip Cropping Group (BCG) Submission to Productivity Commission

Birchip Cropping Group (BCG) is a dynamic not-for-profit agricultural research and extension group led by farmers from the Mallee-Wimmera region of Victoria. BCG was formed in 1992 to improve the farm incomes of its members and of the regional farming community, to bolster broader community vitality and to provide practical solutions to farm production constraints.

BCG's mission is "To improve the prosperity of farmers and agricultural communities through farmer driven innovation". BCG is nationally recognised as a pioneer in farmer-driven research with successful transfer of information to the farming community. BCG's approach to implementing participatory research changed the traditional process of researchers trying to engage growers. Instead the growers identified their issues, realised they could initiate research and then engaged the "expert" researchers in order to find answers together. This recipe has resulted in BCG becoming a leader, not in the invention of participatory research and extension, but simply successfully implementing it.

There is enormous public and private benefit in the work that BCG carries out, for a relatively small investment. There is almost always a public benefit from agricultural RD&E undertaken by BCG – with a more sustainable resource base, vibrant communities and clean and green food and fibre delivering public good. However views on what is public vs private benefit varies in the industry.

BCG does not rely on any one organisation for more than one third of its income – a risk management approach to income diversification has been taken. GRDC continues to be the core and constant investor, and numerous government, private and philanthropic investors are sought each year. 85% of income is from competitive grants. 15% is from corporate sponsorship and membership. A critical issue is securing investment to cover overheads – RDCs, DAFF and State Government do not cover such expenditure. This leaves BCG, as a NFP reliant on external funds, in a highly vulnerable position.

Farmer driven RD&E groups are a highly targeted and efficient delivery tool for research providers and research investors such as GRDC and CSIRO. Some successful groups have evolved beyond small paddock based discussion groups, and now have infrastructure and overhead requirements. Other groups continue to operate highly efficient and lean operations. A model that reflects this new player (farmer groups) in the agricultural RD&E landscape needs to be developed, otherwise they will perish, leaving farmers and industry with no access to already departed state agencies, universities and research investors such as RDCs. The consequence will be a vacuum in the innovation pipeline and a loss of connectivity between research and application.

The BCG Board and management invite the Productivity Commission to visit and meet to further discuss the issues above and others.

BCG Agricultural Community Innovators

Birchip Cropping Group - BCG

Innovation, leadership, excellence in research and extension and a deep desire to improve communities are all synonymous with the BCG. BCG is highly regarded as Australia's leader in supporting farm businesses and associated rural enterprises thus fostering prosperous towns, regional pride and community wellness.

Despite ten years of drought affected seasons, BCG has matured and developed into an organisation that is known for its capacity to develop and deliver supportive, informative programs and projects that keep farmers optimistic and positive about adopting cutting edge practices.



The BCG has numerous large scale projects which deal with technology transfer. The BCG has been successful in its tendering for these projects through its close attention to detail in relation to the relevance of the work to be undertaken (relevance to farmers) and its successful management of these projects. Several of the permanent staff as well as contracted consultants have many years of experience in managing large scale projects. In 2009 BCG had a turnover of \$2.2M. BCG is managed by a board of directors who include 6 farmers and 4 co-opted specialists. Since its inception in 1992 BCG has been managing projects and programs in partnership with GRDC, CSIRO, DPI, Australian Greenhouse Office, RIRDC, Vic Govt and various departments of the Australian Federal Government. BCG has staged children's field days, events for young farmers and women's farming events and most recently has formed the Women's Agronomy Group. Research and demonstration undertaken by BCG has clearly improved farm management practices and placed regional farmers in the position of maximising rain events when they finally happen. Programs such as Making Conservation Pay has ensured that minimal soil erosion now occurs instead of the horrific dust storms of previous years thus protecting vital top soils. Through BCG, Wimmera and Mallee communities have benefited from events, workshops and conferences being held locally and have reaped the indirect benefits of over 2000 visitors per year into the region.

The BCG has excellent networks with its agri-business partners and is able to draw on their experience when required (ie. main BCG agri-business partners are: AWB, Bayer Crop Sciences, Nufarm, CASE IH, Landmark, Incitec-Pivot). The experience of these companies in marketing and project management has been drawn on several times to improve the functionality of BCG operations.

Demonstrates outstanding innovative and entrepreneurial business achievements in agribusiness

The uniqueness of the BCG situation is that the farmers themselves are the drivers of participatory research and extension of agronomy. The impact of this approach has been dramatic, so much so that BCG was described in 'The Sunday Age' as "one of the most innovative outfits in the bush" (The Age, 2002). BCG was one of the first to test and validate new crops such as canola and lentils in the Mallee in the early 1990s. BCG was the key driver in 'unearthing' regional subsoil constraint problems, leading to national Research & Development investment programs. The Making Conservation Pay (MCP) program, initiated by BCG in 2004, tackles issues of sustainability within production and conservation in the Wimmera and Mallee landscapes. One of the major outcomes from MCP has been the two year 'Diversity in a Piped System' (DIPS) project, which has seized a unique window of opportunity in the development of the Wimmera Mallee Pipeline to evaluate, from a biodiversity perspective, the compatibility of different water delivery systems and water access points within the Wimmera and Mallee agricultural environment. Understanding how farming systems will adapt to climate change to ensure viability and sustainability of farming within the Wimmera Mallee region

BCG Agricultural Community Innovators

is a key component of current BCG work. Yield Prophet®, a support tool used by farmers to help make risk management decisions, has been one of the most innovative concepts to hit the Australian grains industry in the past decade. Yield Prophet® is owned and managed by BCG.

Demonstrates leadership characteristics by motivating and inspiring people to higher levels of accomplishments and teamwork

BCG's leadership characteristics are evident in a range of ways. Nationally and internationally, BCG and staff has been recognised with a number of awards including the Prime Ministers Award for Excellence in Community Business Partnerships for its relationship with corporate partners CASE IH and JJ O'Connor; the Not-For-Profit CEO Award for 'Significant Innovation', the GRDC Seed of Light Award for Excellence in Communication and Extension, Science & Innovation Award for Young People, Victoria Fellowship, Westpac Women in Business recipient and most recently the Banksia Environmental Foundation Land and Biodiversity Award. Through awards such as these BCG has demonstrated that it is a true leader in farmer-driven organisations in Australia. BCG staff and Board members are constantly being sought after to speak at industry forums, and at national and international conferences. Board and staff are also members of a number of Committees and Advisory Groups, further increasing the sphere of influence.

At the ground level, BCG motivates and inspires both the farming community and the broader rural community alike. BCG is improving productivity and viability for the farming community through farmers working together to direct research activities conducted by the organisation. The incorporation of farmers into the decision making mix at BCG is a unique leadership style - empowering farmers to lead farmers. Initiatives such as 'Over The Fence' a weekly newspaper column shares success and failures and assists connect people across the region. Social research undertaken between 2007 and 2009 to identify better ways to manage the impact of drought is delivering broader community benefit opportunities through partnerships.

Knowledge is power – through BCG farmers are given confidence to reach their potential. No matter their acreage, age or attitude, BCG strives to support every farming enterprise. This is done in the knowledge that to have flourishing rural communities we must have prosperous farms.

Is creating a vision for the future of Australian Agribusiness

Many challenges await us in the future, none more challenging and demanding than that of helping farmers continually adjust to both climate change and climate variability. The changes that will result from high energy costs, the introduction of genetically engineered plants and the advances in precision agriculture will be wide-ranging and dramatic. Already the rapid adoption of no-till, the problem of resistant weed populations and the ever-increasing cost price squeeze are causing a new set of issues that seek urgent solutions. The importance of livestock in the farming system continues to stimulate debate, as does the sustainability of our rural communities. From an environmental perspective, the need for sufficient water for our stock and domestic use, as well as for the survival of our native plants, birds and animals, continues to be an issue that BCG is exploring. BCG is currently developing a suite of programs that will take the organisation into the next decade by providing practical solutions to the above highlighted issues. BCG's aim is to continue to build capacity, attract and retain skills, engage young professionals, support young farmers and women in agriculture, foster industry relationships, take applied research to the next level and assist the industry in managing and adapting to change. Ultimately most of our problems are solvable if we create an environment in which we all want to live, where we have financial security and where everyone can share in the rewards of an intelligent, innovative, sharing, caring and contented community.

BCG Agricultural Community Innovators

Demonstrates sustainability of business, social and environmental outcomes

Despite ten years of drought affected seasons, BCG has matured and developed into an organisation that is known for its capacity to develop and deliver programs and projects that are timely, relevant and informative. In 2002 BCG moved into a new \$750,000 research facility. This contemporary building is testament to the commitment of the BCG team and the strength and growth of the organisation since its inception. In 2007 BCG extended its research facility by building a climate controlled glasshouse allowing researchers and students to undertake experimental investigations at a micro level. The BCG budget has grown from \$293,000 in 1998 to \$2,200,000 in 2009 – a remarkable growth for a community organization, in a town with a population of 700, during sustained dry climatic conditions. Business sustainability is being improved through Board recruitment, staff recruitment and training with assistance from external consultants, and support to undertake Masters, Diploma and Certificate level programs.

BCG has always had a strong commitment to the social wellbeing of its members and of the broader farming community. For example knowing what other farmers are up to can restore confidence and help relieve anxiety. BCG developed an excellent initiative – a way of solving practical problems, sharing ideas, providing support validating everyday decisions and reducing the feelings of isolation – and we called it 'Over the Fence'. 'Over the Fence' involved interviewing three different farmers (and their partners/families) from across the Wimmera Mallee every week for twelve weeks. Interviews sought opinions from farmers on in-paddock topical, educational issues. Each week, farmers' responses to particular issues were printed in eighteen regional newspapers including the high profile Victorian Weekly Times. The most recent example of social sustainability is through the social research project of which phase one has recently been completed. 'Critical Breaking Point?' aimed to gain a better understanding of the impact of drought and other pressures upon farming families. This research enables BCG to move forward with programs and projects that are evidence-based, that have been identified as critical in the agricultural community and that position BCG as forward thinking in its endeavours to strengthen and maintain the viability of Australia's farming families and rural communities.

BCG is committed to a range of environmental programs through its Making Conservation Pay program which aims to implement conservation activities which provide landowners with economic and other benefits. Key project areas include productivity mapping, water management, sustainable soils, landscape design, alternate grazing systems and habitat management. The term 'Sustainability' is widely interpreted by different people. The reality is that urban consumers and voters do have an expectation that the environment is well managed and that their food is clean and safe. This program provides the BCG and its farmer members the opportunity to embrace the themes of nature conservation while maintaining a vital focus on the need for long term viability and profitability. Through these projects BCG demonstrates its passionate commitment to environmental sustainability – a commitment that is underpinned with action, practical applications, innovative programs and excellent achievements. Winning the 2007 Banksia Environmental Foundation Award for Land and Biodiversity issues is testament to this.

BCG Extension Activities

Events:

- Open annual public field days (over 500 people attended this field day in 2009).
- Members Only Field Day held in October each year
- Members Only Trials Review Day held in February each year, attended by 180 people.
- A field day each year aimed specifically at women, with attendance of about 200 in 2009.
- A seminar for young farmers, focusing on agriculture in the year 2020 entitled 2020 Vision.
- Seasonal workshops and seminars – topics have included climate risk management.
- Tours and information for Victorian, interstate and overseas visitors. In 2009, 3000 people visited sites.

Training:

- Diagnostic Field Schools – subjects have been spray technology, fungicides, herbicides and subsoil management – trainers at the Diagnostic Field Schools are expert speakers from Australia and overseas.
- Group training courses for the grains industry. These include tertiary students (Marcus Oldham, LaTrobe, RMIT, Melbourne University), government and private agronomists, and staff of the many corporate collaborators.
- Womens Agronomy Group. An agronomic group meeting throughout the year to improve skills.

Hard Copy:

- Publication and distribution of the 'Members Only – Season Results Book'. This contains results of key trial work, reference material and farmer experiences during the previous season and is sent to members in mid February each year.
- Fortnightly technical bulletin to all members during the cropping season – latest and current agronomic information

Web Based:

- Maintenance of an up to date public internet web site - www.bcg.org.au
- Regular forums covering a range of agronomic topics.
- Searchable database of all previous BCG research and trial results.
- Harvest results on the BCG web site within 7 days of harvest
- Yield Prophet® an on-line risk management tool using APSIM (Agricultural Production Systems Simulator) to estimate probable wheat yields.

BCG Research Activities

BCG is the leading grower group in Australia focusing on the research and development of crop production systems. The group has a 18 year history of achieving excellence in the development and delivery of research and extension projects. These projects have been supported by competitively obtained grants from numerous funding agencies.

Subsequently BCG is now recognised as being a regional driver of technology adoption and practice change and a national model for farmer groups. BCG now has a core group of research and extension staff with the capacity for delivery on large research projects and the recognition and ability to involve grower groups throughout the southern Australia in the conduct and delivery of these projects.

GRDC – Increasing water use efficiency

GRDC – Managing Herbicide Resistance

GRDC – Crop Sequencing

RIRDC – Critical Breaking Point?

DCC – ‘Adapting farming systems to climate change’

DAFF (AgFund) - Sharing Knowledge - building capacity and farm production

DAFF (NLP) - Improving no-till thru innovation

DAFF (NLP) - Multi-purpose crops

DCITA (ITOL) - The Yield Prophet - An on-line crop management service for the Australian grains industry

LWA (MCVP) - ‘Prophetable’ Cropping using seasonal forecasting tools

LWA (MCVP) - Yield Prophet - expanding capabilities for farmers risk management

DAFF via LWA – Communicating Climate Change to Agricultural Industries

DAFF via LWA - Healthy Soils for Sustainable Farms

DAFF (NLP) – Perennial Pastures for Profit in the Mallee

GRDC/DAFF/CSIRO – Climate Change Research Program

GRDC/CfoC – Grain & Graze