



Case Study: Group Involvement



The Perennial Pasture Systems (PPS) group was formed in mid 2007 after a meeting convened by Julie Andrew and Ewan Letts from the Victorian Department of Primary Industries. The meeting was conducted in Halls Gap following concerns about the lack of research and extension into productive pastures in the Upper Wimmera and Central Highlands region of Victoria.

WHO
PPS Group
CATCHMENT
Glenelg – Hopkins –
North Central,
Wimmera

PPS Group

A management committee was formed at the meeting which initiated the PPS group. Since then one hundred and forty farm enterprises have joined the group and the area farmed by past and present members covers 153,400 Ha. Group members manage over half a million sheep and more than twelve thousand

cattle; cropping and export hay operations are also conducted on many of the farms.

In the early years, PPS set up pasture demonstrations and trials while at the same time formulating a plan for extension activities which included an annual conference, study tour and farm visits. A project manager was appointed to administer the group's operations.

As the group's membership expanded, so too did its partnerships with industry and PPS was able to partner with research organisations like Meat & Livestock Australia to conduct research work.

PPS also formed long term relationships with Catchment Management Authorities, as well as local and state government departments.

While PPS was fulfilling its stated role of pushing the boundaries of perennial pasture research across Central Victoria and the Southern Wimmera and providing information on productive pasture management to members, there was also something just as important developing.

New Colleagues

While some members of PPS knew each other when they joined the group, many new acquaintances were made at group events and now people look forward to seeking new information as well reinforcing contacts when PPS comes together.

Several PPS members have formed strong friendships by being part of the group. One aspect of the PPS group is the mutual respect for other members, while this is a fairly normal state for farming people; it is shown at a very high level within PPS.

The group attracts a wide range of ages to events and the opinions of all are important. The current management committee has an age range of 25 to 70 years bringing much experience and lots of new ideas to the group.

Breaking down isolation

Farming can be a very isolated occupation and having a wider group of farming friends through PPS has allowed many members to share ideas and get together socially. Another positive in reducing isolation is that PPS is able to employ a project manager who often has phone calls from members with a question that soon turns into an hour long conversation. Since the groups' formation, an annual study tour has been undertaken with visits regionally, interstate and to New Zealand, these play an important part in member's learning but also cement relationships that have been built over time.

In 2016 PPS formed a closed Facebook page which allows members to engage and share information, again breaking down the isolation on their farms.



PPS members with host farmers on the 2015 study tour to New Zealand

Pride in achievements

Many producers are very good at maintaining top pastures, managing complex animal systems and integrating environmental strategies that come together to form productive and sustainable farms.

Farmers are always modest about their achievements but take pride in their pasture and animal systems. In most regions they do not get a chance to show others except for close neighbours.

PPS has allowed many members to be able to showcase their successes with farm tours and site visits. It is fairly common to hear that a group of members

have made an informal visit to a farm to have a look at a new pasture or different variety of plant being tried.

The project manager often gets calls to “come and have a look when you get a chance” at something new on a member farm. PPS members are also very generous in showing off failures as well in the hope that fellow members can learn from the experience.

These visits give members a chance to see what works, what doesn't and what might work next time.

Members' development

As the PPS group has grown, so too has the ability of members to articulate their farming systems to others. Several member farms have hosted on farm trials and field days and members have been called upon to present information and seminars and the annual PPS conference. PPS also hosts visiting farmer groups and again the communication skills of members allow the visitors to get a very clear view of farming in the region.

One of the PPS member farms is now annually hosting a visit from a leading University imparting their knowledge of farming systems to agricultural economics students.

Members who have been elected to the group management committee have also gained skills in planning, administration and governance. PPS also appoints members to project advisory groups to oversee PPS trials and demonstrations which allows them to interact with researchers and have input in project design, data analysis and reporting.



PPS Spring Field Day 2016

Girls 'n' Grass

In 2015, thirty-five members, including nine women, toured farms in New Zealand as part of the PPS annual study tour. This resulted in the participating women wanting to expand their involvement and opportunities within the group.

In March 2016 a women's dinner and workshop was held to explore this idea. This resulted in the formation of Girls 'n' Grass Advisory Group and a long list of suggested activities. This included training, education, social networking, mentoring and promoting careers in agriculture as a positive and rewarding lifestyle choice.

The women attending PPS Girls 'n' Grass functions range from 16 to 85 years in age.

Farmer health

The drought like conditions of 2014 and 2015 brought another focus to PPS. Members were coping with the tough conditions on farm with stock drought feeding being carried out and strategies implemented to maintain ground cover to avoid soil damage.

While the on farm management seemed to be going well, PPS was concerned for member's health, especially mental health with the stress being imposed on farming families due to the drought.

Members were "keeping an eye on each other" and catching up with others for a coffee or a beer to see how they were going. During 2015 the management committee decided that more needed to be done in the region and instigated two resilience seminars to give people both farming and personal information to assist with dealing with the drought.

These seminars led to PPS receiving some assistance from the regional health service Grampians Pyrenees Primary Care Partnership (GPPCP) which was engaging with the farming community during the drought.

PPS decided that this alliance should continue after the drought and it is now a partner of the GPPCP who help to bring health information to the group.

The GPPCP conducted health checks at the 2016 conference and assisted in bringing a speaker on skin cancer to the end of year event.

Group growth

PPS has been able to attract funding for both its research and extension programs to allow the group to expand.

PPS has grown with the aid of a good business plan and good governance which was always the aim from the beginning. PPS has also grown due to the positive attitude of those involved and their pride in their group; this is often commented on by invited guest presenters at conferences, study tours and field days.

At the 2015 Annual PPS conference a short film was shown outlining the history and progress of the PPS group. Inaugural PPS President Simon Brady introduced the film and commented at its conclusion; "when we started we thought it might be just a few people in utes getting together to look at pastures, it is great to see how far we have come".

Further reading can be found on the PPS website

www.perennialpasturesystems.com.au

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