



SMART*choice* Newsletter 4 June 2008

This newsletter is another update on the project called SMART*choice*. To refresh your memory, SMART*choice* is a Commonwealth funded National Landcare Program (NLP) project developed in response to the closure of the local tobacco industry. This part time project is actually due to wind-up at the end of the 2007/08 financial year so this could be the last SMART*choice* newsletter. Funding for a continued project has been sought, but it could be a month or so before TAFCO has an indication from the Commonwealth Department of Fisheries and Forestry whether the proposal has been successful. The general focus of a successful 'new' project would be to concentrate on soil health, produce quality assurance, water use and crop nutrition issues. However, there would still be other project components that would allow for activities such as the provision of 'guest speakers' to talk about subjects that landowners in the area are keen on.



The survey mentioned in previous newsletters and targeting former tobacco farmers has been completed. Former tobacco growers were in general very cooperative with the survey. There were some fairly strong trends evident in the responses. Whilst numbers don't directly help anyone they have at least been useful to determine what former tobacco farmers are interested in and what they see as 'barriers' to future farming. Based on the responses a range of meeting opportunities covering topics as diverse as lucerne production to hydroponic glasshouse production have been organised during the life of this project.

The survey was mailed or handed to 87 farmers who had grown tobacco in the 2005/06 season. By 1 March 2008, 75 former growers had completed and returned their surveys. The responses represented a good spread of farm size, existing land use diversification and age. The 87 landowners sent the land-use survey were of course not the complete list of former tobacco growers. A number of shareholders did not produce a tobacco crop in the 2005-06 season and were not targeted. Others still, had left the area soon after the announcement of industry closure or had indicated they were unwilling or unable to complete the survey.

Over the next few pages some of the key survey trends will be discussed as well as a comment on some of the observations on the past twelve months of the SMART*choice* project.

Regards Gary Baxter/Kerry Murphy

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Some Survey Responses

The survey responses clearly indicated that most former tobacco farmers or members of their family want to remain involved with agriculture. This was not unexpected, as 95% of the survey respondents said that their family had been involved with farming for over 20 years. However, whilst a wish to remain in agriculture was clearly noted, the responses also indicated that over half of all former tobacco farming families now have at least one member of the family working **off-farm** in either a part time or full time capacity.

Well over half of the survey respondents also indicated that this **off-farm** lifestyle is likely to continue at least in the short term. This response may indicate a degree of contentment with the new post tobacco lifestyle or it may be an acknowledgment that most farms are not seen as big enough to operate as stand alone enterprises.

Some very strong trends emerged as far as what former tobacco growers are doing **on-farm**. The most significant land uses in the post tobacco environment are pasture and fodder production. These include summer fodder crops (*for example millet*), perennial pasture crops (*for example lucerne*), and permanent grass-legume pastures (*often for a family grazing operation*). In fact 56 of the 75 respondents indicated involvement with some form of commercial fodder or pasture production.

On the other hand some former tobacco growers are conducting ‘new’ intensive horticultural pursuits on various scales. For example, a handful of former tobacco growers have planted small areas of ‘berries’ and ‘nuts’ since the tobacco industry’s closure. In a similar vein, approximately ten of the survey respondents indicated an involvement in vegetable production (*at the time they completed the survey*). This vegetable production also included hydroponic greenhouse crops (*on a small scale*) and vegetable seed production (*for commercial seed companies*).



This photo shows one former tobacco farmer utilising hilling equipment and preparing ground for bed forming prior to planting a crop for vegetable seed production. (Your most recent TAFCO newsletter included details on some row cropping equipment donated to TAFCO by the Victorian Minister for Agriculture Joe Helper on behalf of DPI. This is one of those pieces of equipment).

Obviously, in a post tobacco environment there is a lot of uncertainty. Farmers don’t just jump into new land uses without a lot of considered thought. Almost all survey respondents acknowledged ‘**lack of market knowledge**’ and ‘**lack of motivation to chase new markets**’ as significant barriers. Very high numbers also noted a current ‘**unwillingness to invest significantly in new farm enterprises**’ and ‘**water security**’ as also impacting on their future land use decisions.

Whilst responses have clearly indicated uncertainty amongst former tobacco growers, other answers have suggested that most former tobacco growers still want to keep an eye on what is happening agriculturally in the area, as well as on agriculture in general. This probably means that many former tobacco farmers have not completely ‘shut the door’ to pursuing intensive or semi-intensive land use change. So, if this project continues, project staff will keep organising meetings (*with guest speakers on particular topics*), newsletters and visits to look at enterprises in other areas.

Some former tobacco farmers (*or members of their family*) have discovered that off-farm employment has necessitated increasing their skills. It is important to note that several former tobacco growers have indicated an interest in training in the areas of ‘Market Research’ and ‘Development of Business Skills’ as well as more practical skills such as heavy vehicle licences or trade certificates. Regardless of whether this project continues there will be opportunities for training in the future.

Some Observations and Trends of the Past Twelve Months

During the past 12 months SMART*choice* project staff have organised several ‘special interest’ meetings on topics that former tobacco growers have requested information on. We have had visiting experts present information on topics as diverse as lucerne, summer fodder, maize, vegetables, nuts, berries, glasshouse crops and several others. **These meetings have had the simple aim of providing information and contacts.** The meetings definitely have not promoted a particular activity as ‘the way to go’. Individuals need to do their own homework as far as production choices go.

In other instances SMART*choice* project staff have been the ones who have provided information. This has occurred when project staff have briefed visitors who have come to the area inquiring about particular opportunities. Standard presentations detailing the assets of the area (*water, soil and equipment*) and the expertise of former tobacco farmers were developed to cater for these visitors.



Several visitors to the area have discussed seed production options including vegetable, pasture and fibre crops such as hemp (see photo on the left).

Before you ask, the photo was not taken locally. David Ward (Demand Farming Australia©) provided the photo and it is used with his permission. The person in the crop is Bernie McMullen from the NSW DPI. Representatives of the Demand Farming Australia© group spoke at the Outlook Conference in Myrtleford in November 2007. They discussed among other things ‘covered cropping’ (for example berries) and seed production (for example hemp).

Whilst on the topic of seed production, one former tobacco grower has sown a native grass species for seed production. This photo shows a close-up photo of a site where a stand of a native grass variety has been established. Weed control strategies have been a significant challenge for the owner.



We acknowledge that many former tobacco growers have clearly indicated they are unwilling to invest significantly in agriculture. However, the reality has been that several of our ‘guest speakers’ in the past twelve months have talked about crops requiring large investment. Examples have included glasshouse hydroponic production and ‘covered’ farming. Several guest speakers have indicated, both types of production are likely have increasing prominence in future Australian agriculture. Both pursuits probably do not fit the profile of former tobacco growers at the moment.



Graeme Smith (President of the Australian Hydroponic Grower’s Association) supplied the photo on the left and it is used with his permission. Graeme was a guest speaker at a meeting in Myrtleford on 27 February 2008. It is an example of modern hydroponic glasshouse production.

David Ward (Demand Farming Australia©) supplied the photo on the right and it is used with his permission. It shows a ‘covered block’ of figs. Representatives of the Demand Farming Australia© group spoke at the Outlook Conference in Myrtleford in November 2007.

And what of the Future?

At the start of this newsletter we commented that future project funding has been sought through the Commonwealth funded National Landcare Program. All readers would undoubtedly agree that there is no single ‘new’ crop that is suddenly going emerge. Obviously, former tobacco growers are moving in different directions as they change their land uses and think about their futures. However, if the proposed project is funded, at least there will be a capacity available (*through TAFCO*) to facilitate meetings and contacts as well as ‘help’ with other production factors such as soil health, water use efficiency, and produce quality assurance. So at this stage we are in the wait and see phase.