



# IREC – casualty of drought?

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## IN A NUTSHELL

- The future operations of IREC are under scrutiny as funding sources become scarce and farmer interest wanes
- For 70 years IREC has provided a forum for irrigators to provide 'ground up' input into research and extension carried out in the Murrumbidgee Valley
- Now, IREC is seeking irrigator feedback about the its value and potential role into the future

*IREC formed in the 1930s in response to irrigators seeking ways to manage their farms in the wettest years on record. Now in a period of the driest years on record, IREC is struggling to survive.*

The Executive Committee of the Irrigation Research & Extension Committee (IREC) faces a difficult prospect – to close the doors of the 70 year old organisation, which has been instrumental in instigating so much research and extension in the irrigation industry of the Murrumbidgee Valley.

The impact of all-time low water allocations for irrigators is starting to filter through to organisations such as IREC. For many years now, IREC activities and operations have been supported through direct funding from R&D corporations and management fees of R&D projects.

Low water allocations mean low crop production. Low crop production means less R&D levies are raised, and hence significantly less money is available from R&D corporations for organisations like IREC.

Additionally, and possibly due to drought, interest and participation by farmers in IREC's activities has waned, calling into question the relevance of and need for IREC.

## Is IREC important to irrigators of the Murrumbidgee Valley?

A potted history of IREC will help recap why IREC formed in 1939 and what it has been involved with over the years.

### The past

The origins of IREC date back to 1939 when three government agencies in the region – the Water Conservation and Irrigation Commission, the Department of Agriculture, and CSIR (now known as CSIRO) – came together to form the 'Irrigation Research & Extension Committee'.

IREC was formed in response to the problems new settlers in the MIA were facing as they came to grips with the technology of irrigated production during the wettest year on record, which dealt a crippling blow to the horticultural industry. Also there was increased pressure for food production from the region, with the outbreak of WWII. These circumstances provided the incentive for a co-operative approach from government agencies and irrigators to deal with irrigators' problems.

Around the same time, irrigators' own organisations and commodity marketing cooperatives were coming together and in 1941 a joint executive committee of growers' organisations was formed. This committee, the government agencies' committee (IREC) and an advisory committee of CSIR worked along separate but parallel lines until, in 1947, the three committees came together to form the IREC of today.

### The present

All the grower and government organisations, or derivatives of them, that formed IREC originally are still involved with IREC today. It is probably the only organisation in the region that can boast such a diverse range of industries in its membership.

These organisations and industry bodies support common goals that IREC seeks to achieve – to provide the mechanism for the research scientist, the extension officer and the farmer to share information and work as a team, and to identify and facilitate research and extension work in the MIA and CIA, that addresses knowledge and adoption gaps.

It achieves these goals by including irrigators in its structure to feed information 'from the ground up' to ensure research projects are designed to be relevant and useful, and that results of research is disseminated to those that need it – the irrigators.

The structure of IREC includes an Executive Committee, whose role is to handle administrative matters and determine policy, and a series of sub-committees, whose role is to examine specific areas in detail and ensure relevant research and actions to resolve issues takes place.

A strength of IREC has been that it has been able to evolve and tackle different issues as they arise and fill the gaps that other organisations with more specific purposes may not be able to address. Over the years, IREC has been involved in a wide variety of projects, activities, associations and committees including:

- MIA Tile Drain Committee
- Rice Research Committee
- The Murrumbidgee Valley Rural Counselling Service
- NSW Canning Fruit Growers Association
- MIA Vine Improvement Society



- Benerembah Irrigation District Environment Protection Trust
- MIA Joint Wheat Committee
- Australian Melon Growers Association
- *Ricecheck* programme and publication
- *Production of Quality Rice in South Eastern Australia*
- The development of a wheat variety suitable for production under irrigation
- Development of a picking machine for citrus
- Production of *Australian Vegetable Growing Handbook*
- Production of *Growing Melons Successfully* book
- Various experiments in conjunction with CSIRO

### IREC flagships

Of recent years, IREC is probably most widely recognised for a range of extension-orientated activities it organises. These activities bring together information, experts (scientist and farmer) and view points on all aspects of the management of irrigation production systems.

#### Irrigated Farm Competition

The Irrigated Farm Competition ran from 1980–2006. The competition highlighted and applauded good agronomic, business and resource management. The event included a presentation dinner, which many high profile guests attended over the years. The event overall provided a great platform to showcase efficient and successful irrigation farming. With the onset of the drought, the competition was suspended as most farmers were not operating to their full capabilities.

#### Grower seminars & field days

For several years, IREC has hosted an annual Cropping Update – the last couple of years this has been in conjunction with GRDC. These updates give growers in the region an opportunity to hear the latest on grains related research and management options for irrigated grains production systems. IREC has also been instrumental in running many field days around the region to provide irrigators with opportunities to see irrigation systems, crops and other management operations in action.

#### Irrigators Hall of Fame

In 2004, the Irrigators Hall of Fame was instituted. The MIA is a young irrigation area and much of its history is still to be written down. The Hall of Fame is a way to highlight, honour and document the pioneering efforts of people who have made a significant contribution to the present success of irrigation and all its associated aspects in the MIA, and potentially in other areas too.

#### The Farmers' Newsletter

This very journal, the Farmers' Newsletter, has been published by IREC since 1944. It is a widely respected and valued publication, providing an opportunity for irrigators to read about research, analysis and assessment of many techniques, crops and products of interest to irrigators.

#### Irrigated Cropping Forum (ICF)

Over recent years, IREC has been one of four organisations that form the Irrigated Cropping Forum. This forum gives irrigators in the southern Murray-Darling basin a 'critical mass' to attract funding for research and extension activities. Its success has been marked by securing the most significant amount of funding yet for research on irrigation grains production (non rice) to

identify winter cereal varieties suited to irrigation. The research project is carried out by NSW DPI and ICF is a key partner in the project and undertakes some extension aspects of the project. The ideas and support for this project originated from irrigators and their feedback to ICF's component organisations.

### The future

IREC's Executive Committee, and others who have been involved with IREC, recently took a long hard look at the organisation by taking part in a 'Strategic Planning Workshop'. The outcomes from this self-analysis were many and varied, and the executive will be using the outcomes of this discussion to inform their decision on IREC's future.

A summation of the outcomes was that the activities of IREC such as the *Farmers' Newsletter*, Irrigated Farm Competition and GRDC Cropping Update were valued and useful. However, the group believed that recently the profile, the level of activity and the relevance of IREC had dwindled and that to reinvigorate the organisation, a new direction is needed.

What that direction should be was also discussed, but not resolved. Suggestions were to concentrate more on extension than research, to be a storehouse of information related to irrigation, to seek funds for research on different topics and to become a promotional organisation. It was agreed changing focus to concentrate on any of these things would change the essence of what IREC was set up to achieve and would in fact lead to IREC being a different type of organisation, undertaking different activities to what it has in the past.

At the IREC Annual General Meeting in November, the following proposal will be put to members:

***That IREC go into recess for 12 months. It is proposed that the executive will then reassess the organisation's position in late 2009.***

To make this decision, IREC members and the Executive Committee need to know what irrigators think, need and want, in terms of an organisation that helps shape the research and extension carried out in the area.

### IREC needs you!

There are several ways to have your say about the future of IREC.

- Contact IREC directly by phone, fax or email – contact details on page 2 of this publication.
- Speak with an IREC Executive Committee member – committee members and contact details listed on page 40 of this publication
- Complete the survey form enclosed with this magazine
- Attend the AGM of IREC, in Griffith, November 2008.

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### Further information

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