



Facing challenges, making changes

Murrumbidgee Horticulture Council

IN A NUTSHELL

- A project targeting rural women has provided training and information sources to help them participate in their own farm businesses more fully and to contribute to a more environmentally sustainable region

Two heads are better than one – so ‘they’ say! So when both partners work together to run a farm business you not only double the resources on hand, you also have two different sets of strengths and capabilities.

The contribution of women in many family farm businesses has long been recognised but traditionally their skills have been applied to book-keeping and driving machinery at harvest. Women really haven't been recognised as participants in other areas of the farm business. It was this 'under use' of the female resource that led to the success of the project *Agriculture and the environment: facing the challenges and making the changes*.

The project funded by the Natural Resources Advisory Committee NSW and managed by Murrumbidgee Horticulture Council (MHC), complemented other programs already existing in the region, particularly MIA EnviroWise and the Environmental Champions Program. Through the training and programs organised by the project, and the diligent and enthusiastic participation of many rural women, project success can be demonstrated through:

- more extensive chemical compliance and reporting on farms in the MIA
- increased community awareness of environmental challenges and changes in the area
- increased acknowledgment and confidence building of women in their roles on farm.

The benefits of the project are twofold. There are immediate on-farm benefits of meeting legislative requirements for chemical use, recording and management; improved safety of farm employees and families; and reduced input costs. And longer-term natural resource benefits are anticipated with better water quality and healthier downstream environments through improved drainage and pollution management.

Why women?

At the conception stage of the project in 2006, commodity prices for agricultural produce were increasingly variable and after another difficult season in 2005–06, many growers in the region were reviewing the long-term viability of their enterprises. In this economic climate it was envisaged that environmental engagement of irrigators was most likely to be successful by moving away from a broad brush approach and targeting specific groups with specific, visible and achievable outcomes.

Thus the project *Agriculture and the environment: facing the challenges and making the changes* formed and it specifically targeted rural women as environmental stewards.

Knowledge, skills & compliance

The aim of the project was to help women understand and learn about the use of pesticides on farms and give them the skills to make their farm businesses chemical compliant. This was achieved through a series of training courses for the women to attain chemical compliance accreditation, and the development on a 'one stop' website about chemical use and compliance, which was designed around the needs of the women participating in the training.

Practical skills

"So much time and money goes into growing a crop. Completing the chemical course not only gave me a certificate but gave our business another set of hands to apply the chemicals. Being able to read labels correctly not only ensures we keep these crops healthy but also ensures the safety of those growing the crops," said Therese Chauncy, course participant and rice grower from Coleambally.

The course gave Hanwood grape grower and contract harvest operator, Virginia Tropeano essential skills to enhance her family business.

"We have designed a form to record chemical use which exactly suits our farming operation. It uses a checklist format and is really simple to fill in at the time of spraying. In our particular situation it could be any one of five people carrying out the spraying on any block on any farm, therefore the easier we could make it, the better. The form doubles as a spray order sheet and lists the chemicals and rates required for the particular spray," Virginia said.

The course also addressed general health and safety issues.

"Many women physically work within their farming enterprises, thus increasing the need to maintain good health and core body strength to prevent possible injury. We had a personal trainer speak to the group about back injury prevention and strengthening exercise," said project officer Maree Brown.

Ongoing access to knowledge

The website developed by the project, *Rural women – what you need to know about chemicals*, provides information presented during the training course and additional information to help



rural women continue to gain knowledge about chemical management.

"Becoming accredited in chemical management and participating in establishing the website assisted the women to be more confident in their roles on farm," said Karen Hutchinson, Executive Director of Murrumbidgee Horticulture Council.

"The website provides a chemical compliance portal or 'one stop' information service. It has been designed to be user friendly and help women to know what they don't know, what they need to know and how to go about it in areas such as training, reporting and compliance."

According to Karen, it is the partnerships between organisations such as MHC and NSW Farmers, FarmCare and irrigation companies, Murrumbidgee Irrigation and Coleambally Irrigation who have developed training programs to meet the needs of farm businesses in areas like the MIA that assist in making it a better place to live.

"Women on farms often have a more active social and environmental conscience than their partners, and they could quickly see the benefits of the project.

"The environment is where we live and work, and with better understanding and knowledge, not only can we make it safer for our families and employees, we can make our businesses compliant with legislation and save on input costs.

"The project started with the specific aim of making farms in the region chemically compliant but as participants broadened their knowledge and confidence, they started seeking information on integrated pest management, alternative farming methods and biodiversity management."

For several women the experience has provided the stepping stones to gaining a Level IV Certificate in Rural Production, Horticulture or Land Management.

The project *Agriculture and the environment: facing the challenges and making the changes* is typical of initiatives undertaken by MHC where a need has been identified by the growers MHC represents, and Council has not only supported policy or implemented a project but also produced a longer-lived result or service, such as the production of *The Green Book* and the development of the Murrumbidgee Water Exchange.

Assisting with challenges & changes

Challenges will continue to rise and face irrigators in the Murrumbidgee Valley. A great benefit of the recent project *Agriculture and the environment: facing the challenges and making the changes* is that a number of farm management teams in the Murrumbidgee Valley are now better skilled to make changes thanks to the opportunity to tap into new talent and train women in farm partnerships. The added skills will contribute to better managed farms in a more sustainable environment, and all this makes for a more sustainable region.

Further information

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W: Rural Women – what you need to know about chemicals – go to www.murrumbidgeehort.org.au & then click on the Rural Women link.



Figure 1. The project *Agriculture and the environment: facing the challenges and making the changes* provided rural women with training and access to information to better participate in their own irrigation farm businesses and to contribute to a better environment.

Best management practice made easier

The Green Book came about to consolidate and distil, for MIA horticulturalists, the minefield of information, recommendations and requirements about environmental management. It is an environmental management guide for perennial horticulture in the MIA. The book was first published in 2003 and hard copies are still available through the offices of MHC.

Part 1 of *The Green Book* has been revised and updated in 2009 and is now available on the MHC website.

The Green Book serves as a useful reference guide and 'further reading' for the women who participated in the *Agriculture and the environment* project, as well as for the farming community in general.

Further information – www.murrumbidgeehort.org.au & click on *The Green Book* link

Meeting market demand for a new market

The Murrumbidgee Water Exchange is a water trading service developed and operated by MHC. Murrumbidgee Horticulture Council had been a strong supporter of the separation of land and water. Given that many high security water users had implemented more efficient irrigation systems or management techniques on farm, the trade of 'excess' water was seen as a way to pay-off the investment; or indeed fund such investments. Once trade of water was sanctioned in 1994 as part of the COAG Water Reform Framework, there was a need to establish a water exchange so irrigators could actively trade their water.

The exchange now facilitates trade of both temporary and permanent water. All funds raised through trade go back to MHC to fund its involvement in water policy issues, which is of benefit to all irrigators in the region.

Further information – www.murrumbidgeewater.com.au or phone 02 6964 2420