



Know-how for Horticulture™

**VegeLink network -
Developing a
vegetable industry
regional network in
Western Australia**

Jim Turley
Potato Growers Association
of WA Inc

Project Number: VG02002

VG02002

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Final Report

VG02002 (May 2006)

Vegetable Link Network

**Developing a Vegetable Industry Regional Communication
Network in Western Australia**



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VG02002

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Purpose of the report:

Vegetable growers in this state had an ineffective input into the decision making process due to a lack of communication between the growing regions. To solve this, a Regional Communication Network involving all the major growing regions in Western Australia was needed.

Funding from Horticulture Australia Limited to undertake this project is gratefully acknowledged.



May 2006

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Media summary

The Australian Vegetable Industry Strategic Development Plan aims to make the industry 'cohesive, profitable and environmentally responsible' by 2010. This will make it 'a serious competitor in the global food business with a reputation for quality'. One of the limiting factors for achieving this was identified as a lack of communication and collaboration within the industry across Australia.

For Western Australia, the distance between vegetable enterprises is vast and as such, a good communication network had never been developed for the state. This meant vegetable growers, as individuals, had no effective input into the decision making process. Communication difficulties also meant the industry, as a whole, would be slow to respond to changes in direction, technology or consumer demand.

Using funding provided by Horticulture Australia Ltd, a project plan was established to unify the industry within Western Australia.

This involved the identification of thirteen regional centres throughout Western Australia (Broome, Carnarvon, Geraldton, Dongara, Gingin (West), Gingin (East), Carrabooda, Wanneroo, Baldivis, Myalup, Busselton, Manjimup and Albany) and the appointment of a representative for each region to provide that valuable communication network between growers of different regions.

VegetablesWA is that communication network owned and operated by all the vegetable producers in Western Australia. VegetablesWA provides a structure where the growing regions have an effective input through their regional representatives that make up the committee of management. This committee also provides a forum where the producers can network while raising and discussing issues that effect the production and marketing of vegetable products.

Even in its infancy, VegetablesWA has shown how much it can achieve for the industry by exercising its strength through unification of producers to lobby governments. Some of its successes include country of origin labelling on fresh produce, its activity in stopping the Western Australian government from applying charges for water usage and in highlighting the industry's cooperation to reduce nutrient leaching.

VegetablesWA provides a unified association that can now effectively join the rest of the Australian vegetable industry to communicate, collaborate and contribute to the Australian Vegetable Industry Strategic Development Plan.

Introduction

In 1998, a project was developed to establish a strategic direction for the Australian vegetable industry. The project identified that one of the industry's aims was profitability. From this, the vision of the Australian Vegetable Industry Strategic Development Plan became 'that the Australian Vegetable Industry by 2010 will be cohesive, market focussed, profitable and environmentally responsible; positioned as a serious competitor in the global food business and with a reputation for quality'. Five key goals were included in this vision, including:

1. Improve communication and collaboration within the industry
2. Increase domestic consumption of vegetables
3. Increase export sales of vegetables in selected markets
4. Manage the value chain to increase competitiveness
5. Enhance the capability of all participants in the value chain.

Each state developed its own process for implementing plans to address the five goals. In Western Australia, CORREH Consultancies was engaged to develop the recommendations of the Australian Vegetable Industry Strategic Development Plan for this state.

The release of the CORREH Consultancies report (2001) identified a number of priorities for the success of the Australian Vegetable Industry Strategic Development Plan. This, combined with information received from the IDO program in Western Australia, highlighted the necessity of a regional communication network.

As it stood, vegetable growers, as individuals, had no effective input into the decision making process due to the lack of communication between growing regions. Communication difficulties also meant the industry, as a whole, would be slow to respond to changes in direction, technology or consumer demand.

A regional communication network was required to link the wide-spread growing regions of Western Australia. By uniting vegetable growers through a regional communication network, they would be kept informed of any industry changes and be unified in decisions affecting their industry, thus providing a strong body, capable of reacting quickly.

The aim of this project was to develop a strong communication network between the vegetable growers of Western Australia to improve collaboration within the industry.

Methodology/ Activities

Formation of a project team

Following the signing of a contract on the 27th November 2002 between Western Australian Vegetable Growers Association (Inc.) and Horticulture Australia Ltd, a project team was formed with the appointment of Jim Turley as the project manager.

The Vegetable Industry Communication Network project team, appointed by the Western Australian Vegetable Growers Association (Inc.), consisted of:

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Regular meetings were held by the project team to discuss the implementation of the strategies that had been laid out in the agreement.

Establishment of regional centres

Thirteen regional centres were established throughout Western Australia (Broome, Carnarvon, Geraldton, Dongara, Gingin (West), Gingin (East), Carrabooda, Wanneroo, Baldivis, Myalup, Busselton, Manjimup and Albany). Regional areas were selected according to geographical isolation and shire differences.

Introducing the Vegetable Industry Communication Network

The project team conducted a series of meetings within all the regional centres. These meetings introduced the concept of the Vegetable Industry Communication Network. Growers were encouraged to nominate a local representative to attend a state-wide workshop with representatives from the other regional centres. The meetings also provided an opportunity to identify and record local issues for which the project team could then commence providing assistance.

Ms Deborah Pearson was appointed as the Group Facilitator to assist discussion groups and also conduct the first state-wide workshop (on 18th July 2003) for regional centre representatives.

First state-wide workshop

The workshop aimed to establish regional network communication contacts and to take advantage of the representatives intellect by inviting them to suggest ways the project team could create a Communication Network that would be both relevant and beneficial to the industry and in particular, to the growers.

Ausveg Board Members were able to address the growers at the workshop and network with the regional representatives as the workshop was organised to coincide with the Ausveg Board meeting.

The first State-wide workshop was deemed a success. Specific roles of the project team members and regional representatives and communication transfer channels were established.

The workshop played an integral role in the initial stages for identification of the critical issues for the 13 established regions. Strengths of regions were also identified as part of a plan to identify regional priorities for research and development.

Launching the Vegetable Industry Communication Network

At the biennial dinner, held after the first state-wide workshop by the Western Australian Vegetable Growers Association (Inc.), the Minister for Agriculture in Western Australia launched the Vegetable Industry Communication Network. The dinner was attended by 260 growers, their partners and special guests, providing a unique opportunity to increase the profile of the network.

The launch also promoted the new Vegetable Industry Communication Network logo (Figure 1) that had been selected by the Regional Representatives at the first state-wide workshop.



Figure 1: Vegetable Industry Communication Network logo as decided at the first workshop held on 18th July 2003.

Development of a state-wide database

Following the workshop, the need for a state-wide database to be developed was recognised where communication in the vegetable industry could be conducted. Each grower's relevant current details, crops grown and their interests (eg. Hydroponics, organics, quality assurance, minor use permits) was recorded. Preference for the delivery of communication was registered (52.8 % preferred communication by mail, 22.4 % by Fax and 24.8 % preferred emails).

Testing the communication network

The main purpose of the workshops and meetings was to test the communication network by measuring the effectiveness of communication to growers on issues they had raised to their regional representative. Of those growers attending the regional meetings, 78 % responded positively to receiving and understanding communication via the communication network. The remaining 22 % were unsure or could not remember some or any of the network's communication although there was recognition of some of the issues the network had communicated with them.

Second state-wide workshop (3rd December 2004)

Another state-wide workshop was held on the 3rd December 2004 by the Vegetable Industry Communication Network.

At the workshop, regional leaders provided strategies, direction and feedback on the campaign to establish a fully funded Communication Network in Western Australia in line with the main objectives contained under the outcomes in the original Research, Development and Communication Agreement.

Establishing a fully funded Communication Network

In January and February 2005, there were regional meetings, along with a telephone campaign, letters and property visits to explain the benefits of voting for an APC Vegetable Producers Committee to raise a fee for service for a fully funded Communication Network. The grower database was further updated along with discussions relating to the Agricultural Produce Commission's voting procedures.

At a poll conducted by the Agricultural Produce Commission (APC) on 17th March 2005, 81 % of the growers that voted, favoured the establishment of an APC Vegetable Producers Committee. The successful campaign and vote enabled the Vegetable Industry Communications Network to plan for a sustainable future. The strategies adopted included:

- Defining the role of the organisation,
- A name change,
- A management committee consisting of 20 regional grower representatives to develop policies.
- Each management committee representative or combination of representatives receiving a portfolio
- An Inner-Executive consisting of grower representatives to implement the policies set by the Management Committee
- An APC Vegetable Producers Committee, appointed by the APC, consisting of seven grower representatives to raise a fee for service.

The Vegetable Industry Communications Network then focussed on the proposed industry changes through regional meetings and a workshop, with the new structure to be launched by the Minister of Agriculture at the Vegetable Industry's biennial dinner (12th August 2005). "VegetablesWA" became the new trade mark and business name (Figure 2) for the Vegetable Industry Communication Network.



Figure 2: The new look logo to represent the vegetable growers of Western Australia

Evaluation and measurement of outcomes

Since its formation, VegetablesWA has been involved in the progression of the Horticulture Code of Conduct through representation on the National Review Panel from Western Australia. VegetablesWA has embarked on an ambitious program that will allow the industry to fully investigate future opportunities in the production and marketing of vegetable products in domestic and international markets and to report on vegetable imports.

The network has allowed growers to easily raise their concerns for the industry to their regional representatives, knowing that their voice will be heard. The representatives, combining together with the project team of VegetablesWA can then identify the key issues affecting growers and address these using the united front of VegetablesWA for strength. Some of the major issues that growers had were identified at workshops and meetings. Strengths of regions were also identified as part of a plan to identify regional priorities for research and development. Major issues included:

- Priorities in Research and Development projects that would have beneficial outcomes for growers
- Water allocation
- Security of tenure over water licences
- Water resource management charges
- Trading of water licences
- Water quality
- Occupational health and safety problems
- Quarantine issues and procedures regarding entry and export
- Marketing supply chain issues
- Shortage of labour
- Chemical registration
- Maximum Residues Limits (MRL) for carrots, cauliflowers and broccoli
- Land availability
- Distance from markets
- Nutrient leaching
- Workers compensation too high
- Encroaching urbanisation
- High infrastructure costs
- Conflicts between different land users

At regional meetings and smaller workshops issues at the workshops and had not been solved were discussed in detail. Also discussed were future issues that would have a direct impact on Western Australian vegetable producers in the regional areas.

From this, VegetablesWA decided to develop an on-going educational program to deliver a far clearer understanding of the issues. It was decided that the current Western Australian Industry Development Officer would play a key role in accessing the technology necessary that would make it easier for the growers to digest the

issues. The objective would be to focus on how the Communication Network was coming together to share all the growers ideas culminating in one resolution or a collection of resolutions. Also, how the information contained in these resolutions could be shared between regions or changed by the regions collectively at anytime.

VegetablesWA was able to begin to address the issues raised, reporting back to the regional representatives both on a local and state-wide basis. Coinciding with this work, VegetablesWA began to negotiate policy matters with the State Government that had an effect on the growers. Results of negotiations could be continually communicated to all the growers in Western Australia through the Communication Network. For example, a newsletter sent to growers contained information on water resource management charges, Work Safe and Nutrient contamination. These were three issues the Communication Network had been successful in helping growers to negotiate with Government Ministers, their staff and senior public servants from Government agencies.

1. Water Resource Management Charges.

VegetablesWA has been successful in lobbying backbenchers in the political arena. As a result, the State government will not charge licensed surface and groundwater users or any other water user in the foreseeable future. On the agenda for further discussion was long-term security of licences and nutrients entering the aquifer.

2. Work Safe.

VegetablesWA was successful in negotiating with senior Work Safe management, that senior inspectors would adopt a positive attitude of trying to help the growers during random Work Safe inspections on properties. Through the communication network, growers were sent pamphlets to assist them with checking their farm safety issues that Work Safe Inspectors would assess. The contact number of the Executive Officer for the Communication Network was highlighted for growers requiring further assistance in bringing their farm up to standard. The Network communicated to the growers exactly what the inspectors were seeking which, in turn, reduced the cost to growers as they could focus on the problem areas under the Occupational Health and Safety Act that applied to their properties and work place.

3. Nutrient Contamination.

VegetablesWA was important in communicating to the government that growers were cooperating by examining their nutrient application procedures very closely. It was important to highlight to the government that new technology and changes in techniques were adopted wherever possible by growers when fertilising their crops. The network also entered into discussions with the Department of Environment (Water and Rivers Commission) and the Department of Agriculture, trying to persuade them that they need industry input when formulating policy in this area. As a result, both Ministers of these two departments were looking forward to this cooperation and discussions are continuing with the industry. The main aims of the network, in this instance, were to prevent a Minister from arbitrarily announcing a nil tolerance for nutrient leaching.

VegetablesWA provide an on-going communication network, constantly reporting back to growers on progress and providing information on issues. For example, at the second state-wide workshop (3rd December 2004), outside expert speakers were engaged at the workshop to advise the leaders on other issues including the horticulture business code, water trading, market supply chain issues, labour shortages, licences and water resource management charges, ammonium nitrate use and Plant Health Australia (PHA) cost sharing agreement on Biosecurity issues.

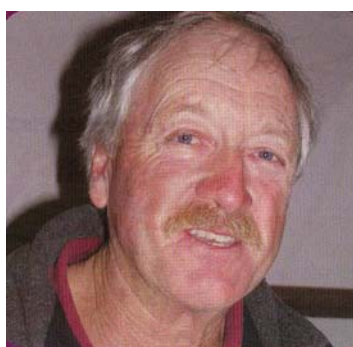
Results and updates on the above issues at the workshop were communicated back to the growers via regional meetings in December 2004 and mail from Horticulture House.

Since then, VegetablesWA has been at the forefront of the Country of Origin Labelling Campaign, working through Ausveg Australia. In Western Australia, VegetablesWA combined with the West Australian newspaper to communicate the vegetable producer's message to the consumers. Consumers responded by sending back 53 000 coupons they had cut out of the paper. National forums were attended along with submissions, letters and general meetings.

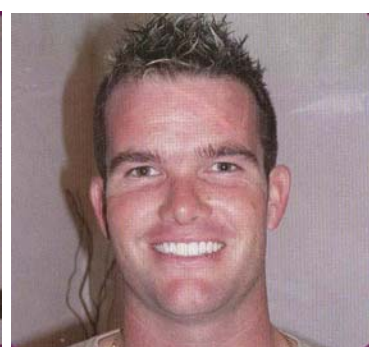
The strength behind VegetablesWA is its management committee, consisting of people dedicated to the industry. These people communicate with the growers, allowing the easy exchange of information to build a strong network. Some members of the VegetablesWA management committee include:



Duc Tran
Geraldton



Rod Copeland
Dongara



Darren Stevens
Gingin (West)



Maureen Dobra
Gingin (East)



Jason Neave
Carrabooda



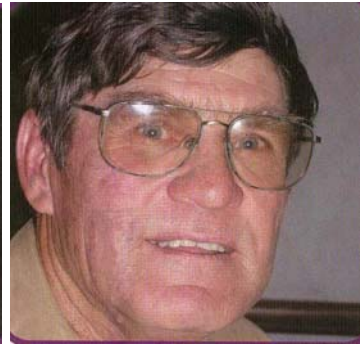
Figaro Natoli
Wanneroo



Paul Humble
Baldivis



Anthony Marinovich
Myalup



Ken Sue
Busselton



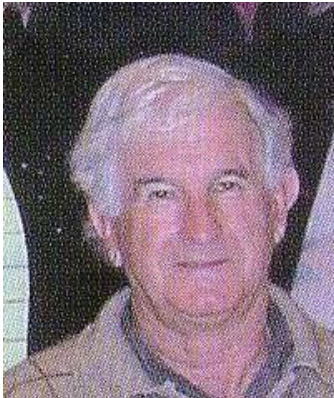
David East
Manjimup



Howard Shapland
Albany



David Anderson
President



Don Arbuckle
Treasurer



Clive Stevens
Ausveg



Sam Calameri
Immediate Past President

Discussion

A Vegetable Industry Regional Communication Network in Western Australia has been successfully established. It is a self-funded association owned and operated by all the vegetable producers of Western Australia. This allows the industry to take ownership of the association, without reliance on external funding. It also enables producers to identify relevant issues and highlight the most important, allowing them to decide the future of their industry.

The successful launch of VegetablesWA through the Vegetable Industry Communication Network project has allowed easy communication with all producers on relevant issues. The network has provided and will provide in the future, a united, strong front, when lobbying governments with regard to critical issues that are the basis of producers' livelihoods such as water and land access, market supply chains, labour shortages and levels of soil nutrients. It aids in the promotion of the vegetable industry as producers of healthy ethical food in a sustainable way.

Even in its infancy, VegetablesWA has already shown how much it can achieve for the industry. Amongst its many achievements, of particular note was its influence on consumers during the country of origin labelling debate. During this, VegetablesWA was able to exercise its power, promoting the industry to consumers and protecting the industry by lobbying for country of origin labels to be placed on all fruit and vegetables. This protects the industry as consumers look to buy local produce to support the industry. Also, it has been active in stopping governments from applying charges for water licences and in highlighting the industry's cooperation to reduce nutrient leaching.

A major achievement of the project has been the improvement of the inadequate database of Western Australian vegetable producers that existed prior to the project commencement. Producer details such as their contact details, main industry interests, crops and how they like to receive correspondence has now been addressed. The information now contained on the database allows the communication network to run more efficiently.

VegetablesWA provides a unified association that can now effectively join the rest of the Australian vegetable industry to communicate, collaborate and contribute to the Australian Vegetable Industry Strategic Development Plan which aims to become 'cohesive, market focussed, profitable and environmentally responsible; positioned as a serious competitor in the global food business and with a reputation for quality' by 2010.

Recommendations

- Continue to work closely with growers in the regional areas.
- Continue interaction with governments, Department of Agriculture and Food and Horticulture Australia Limited for grower benefits.
- Develop an export focus.
- Further develop the image of VegetablesWA to consumers as producers of high quality vegetables within a sustainable production industry.

Acknowledgements

The project team and vegetable growers of Western Australia are very appreciative for the financial support of Horticulture Australia Limited in the formation of VegetablesWA.

The amount of time and effort put in by the project team members, consisting of growers from the regional areas and staff from the Department of Agriculture and Food, Ausveg and VegetablesWA is gratefully acknowledged.

Finally, the vegetable growers of Western Australia must be thanked for their project support and willingness to contribute where possible.