

Industry development and communications project delivering on its promise despite COVID-19 challenges

Jen Rowling, Project Manager, Berries Australia

The Industry Development and Communications project (MT18020) for the Australian Berry Industry has reached the halfway point of its three-year term and feedback received from a recent mid-term evaluation indicates that it is delivering on its objectives despite significant challenges as a result of COVID-19.

Berries Australia Ltd was contracted to deliver a nationally coordinated, locally implemented industry development program in September 2019. The overarching objective of the project is to enhance the adoption of innovation and technology in the Australian berry industry through brokering research and development (R&D) information and facilitating capacity building with an emphasis on:

- Improving production efficiency
- Increasing access to export markets
- Industry capacity building and engagement with industry services
- Increasing domestic consumption through improved quality and forecasting.

The state-based matrix model provides all Australian berry producers with access to a local berry Industry Development Officer (IDO) while separate specialisations are incorporated to support the range of extension and communication needs of the three berry industries.

A series of deliverables for the IDOs in each state are incorporated into annual workplans and include grower visits, industry workshops and field days, webinars, information resources, conferences and training.

A Communications Manager is also tasked with coordinating the production and delivery of the Australian Berry Journal, The Burst eNewsletter, the Berries Australia website and development of other essential information resources in collaboration with the broader project team.

A Project Reference Group, encompassing the experience and expertise of growers and industry associates from across the Australian berry industry provides input and feedback on workplans and the direction of the project to help prioritise activities, extension events and products.

To accurately analyse the success of the project to date, RMCG were engaged to undertake a mid-term evaluation and provide recommendations for improvement of delivery in response to feedback received. The mid-term evaluation incorporated a desktop review of the project plan, needs analysis (compiled at the beginning of the project), milestone reports submitted and all communication outputs produced to date, together with semi-structured interviews with key stakeholder groups including:

- Project Team
- Project Reference Group
- Berry Growers
- Advisors and Extension Providers
- Industry Associations
- Researchers
- Supply Chain Participants

One of the key successes of the project to date that was acknowledged across all stakeholder groups is the ability of the project team to efficiently and effectively adapt to the changing needs of the industry, which was clearly evident in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The team were able to navigate complex and somewhat conflicting information regarding on-farm restrictions, border closures and other labour related issues to deliver timely and accurate COVID-19 specific material.

This helped to ensure that growers had their information up to date and were able to meet government requirements for on-farm health and safety. Information was distributed via special editions of The Burst e-Newsletter, weekly emails and the production and distribution of relevant resources for use on farm such as COVID-19 checklists, policies and safe plans relative to the respective state guidelines.

A contributing factor to the effectiveness of this response is the cohesion within the project team and their ability to work well together despite geographical distance. Although the pandemic restricted the ability to coordinate on-farm or in-person workshops and field days, the team were able to adapt to online workshops, webinars and Zoom meetings, and get creative with video production shared via YouTube. A subsequent unintended but valuable outcome of the project during this time is that growers have now become more familiar and confident with these online technologies and meeting platforms, providing access to content at times that are more convenient to them and allowing increased opportunities to participate in online activities due to travel not being required.

Despite the adjustments to information delivery caused by COVID-19, the project continued to demonstrate progress towards the intended outcome of improving awareness of berry industry R&D through its key communication products, the Australian Berry Journal and The Burst eNewsletter. Industry relevant R&D information was effectively disseminated, and this was validated through the grower survey, stakeholder interviews and the desktop review, all of which confirmed the reach of these communication platforms (84% of respondents to the grower survey confirmed they had received the communication material).

Moving into the second half of the project and with the easing of COVID-19 restrictions, the team are now looking forward to being able to re-focus on the strategic research and innovation needs of the industry, and to incorporating the delivery of in-person activities back into workplans. Whilst digital delivery of information will continue as a means to effectively reach a broader network of growers, activities such as workshops and field days will be rolled out to capitalise on a desire across industry to “re-connect”. This, together with the improved relationships and trust that has been formed between the IDOs and growers during the pandemic will help ensure that the project is back on track to contribute to the longer-term outcome of on-farm practice change.

Broad recognition from across industry indicates that stakeholders believe investment in an ongoing industry development project for delivery of extension and communication resources and activities is a priority, and would like to see the project extended beyond the current 3 year iteration.



Celeste Cook (Tas) and Angela Atkinson (Vic/SA) and Suzette Argent (Qld) at recent IDO Conference.

Photo credit: Jen Rowling, Berries Australia

MT18020 – Current project team

Management/Administration			
Position	Name	Organisation	Location
Project Leader	Rachel Mackenzie	Berries Australia	Brisbane, QLD
Project Manager	Jennifer Rowling	Berries Australia	Brisbane, QLD
Project Coordinator	Wendy Morris	Berries Australia	Brisbane, QLD
Project Team			
Position and Expertise	Name	Organisation	Location
Industry Development Officer – NSW (Blueberries/Pollination/Chemical/Next Gen)	Melinda Simpson	NSW Dept of Primary Industries (NSW DPI)	Wollongbar, NSW
Industry Development Officer – VIC & SA (Strawberries/Biosecurity/Pest & Disease)	Angela Atkinson	Vic Strawberry Industry Development Committee (VSIDC)	Wandin, VIC
Industry Development Officer – QLD (Strawberries)	Suzette Argent	Qld Strawberry Growers Association (QSGA)	Caboolture, QLD
Industry Development Officer – TAS (Rubus)	Celeste Cook	Fruit Growers Tasmania Inc (FGT)	Launceston, TAS
Industry Development Officer – WA (Strawberries)	Helen Newman / Aileen Reid	Agricultural Produce Commission (APC)	Perth, WA
Communications Specialist	Jane Richter	Teres Communication	Glasshouse Mts, QLD
Needs Analysis, MERI framework and mid-term evaluation	Emily Tee	RMCG	Melbourne, VIC

