

Strong Delivery, Stronger Measurement Needed

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This article provides an overview of the recent project report 'Independent mid-term review of MT22010 - Facilitating the development of the Australian berry industries (MT25004)'

Australia's berry growers are no strangers to change. New pests, shifting labour pressures, emerging technologies, evolving consumer expectations, and increasing market complexity mean growers need timely, practical and regionally relevant information more than ever before. That is exactly what the Hort Innovation-funded project 'Facilitating the Development of the Australian Berry Industries (MT22010)' was designed to deliver.

Now, halfway through the project, an independent mid-term review has taken a close look at how the investment is tracking, what's working well, and where improvements could strengthen outcomes for growers over the remaining life of the project.

The review, conducted independently by GHD Pty Ltd for Hort Innovation, assessed progress from July 2023 through to the end of 2025 and involved extensive document analysis alongside interviews with 17 stakeholders, including growers, agronomists, Industry Development Officers (IDOs), Hort Innovation representatives and industry partners.

What is the project aiming to achieve?

The project was established to help berry growers adopt innovation and technology through a nationally coordinated but regionally delivered extension and communications program. At its core, the investment aims to:

- Improve production efficiency
- Increase access to export markets
- Build industry capability and engagement
- Improve knowledge sharing and practice adoption across the berry sector

The project combines:

- A national communications program, including the Australian Berry Journal, The Burst e-newsletter, the Berries Australia website and Resource Library, social media and technical resources
- A state-based extension program delivered by specialist IDOs working directly with growers through workshops, field days, webinars, on-farm visits and events such as BerryQuest

What did the review find?

Focus areas remain on target

The review found the four key project focus areas remain highly relevant to growers:



Pest & Disease Management



Irrigation & Nutrition Management



Business & Labour Management



Innovation & Technology Adoption

Overall, the review concluded that the project is “making good progress towards its intended outcomes” and that stakeholders view the program positively.

Importantly, reviewers found that the project team has a “deep understanding of growers and industry need” and highlighted the strong collaboration occurring between the IDOs and communications team.

One stakeholder described the project team as “probably one of the healthiest teams I’ve actually worked with in terms of collaboration and goodwill.”

Think national, deliver local

The review also recognised the value of the nationally coordinated but regionally delivered model, allowing specialist expertise from one region to support growers in another when needed.

Examples included:

- Tasmanian Rubus specialist Mark Salter travelling to Queensland to support growers
- NSW blueberry specialist Gaius Leong presenting at Tasmanian blueberry field days
- Joint national webinar development and collaborative event planning across states

Communications and extension highly valued

The review found that growers are receiving a “consistent and highly valued range of communication materials via a range of media”.

Achievements highlighted in the report included:

- The regular production of The Burst e-newsletter
- Continued publication of the Australian Berry Journal
- A Resource Library now housing more than 900 documents
- Development of best practice tools, fact sheets and case studies across multiple berry categories

BerryQuest 2025 in Tasmania was identified as a major project success, with 540 delegates attending and 43 speaker sessions later published online.

Stakeholders described BerryQuest as “a major highlight of the project” and an event that “has gotten better and better over time.”

The review also highlighted strong grower engagement through workshops, field days and webinars focused on practical topics including irrigation, protected cropping, pest management and labour issues.

Areas identified for improvement

While the overall findings were positive, the review identified one major challenge: demonstrating and measuring long-term impact.

The reviewers noted that the project team is clearly delivering activities and generating engagement, but the reporting systems currently do not adequately demonstrate:

- How grower knowledge is changing
- Whether growers are adopting new practices
- The scale of practice change occurring across the industry

Several recommendations were made to strengthen this area during the second half of the project, and these will be implemented across the team. Part of this recommendation is to introduce a more standardised grower feedback collection system which will enable the team to better capture grower knowledge, attitudes, skills, aspirations and practice change.

The reviewers also suggested there may be opportunities for the project team to use case studies more strategically to demonstrate adoption outcomes, and to collaborate nationally on a single major issue affecting all regions – such as chemical resistance – to create a clearer and more measurable impact.

Additional recommendations included:

- Improving searchability and visibility of the currency of resources within the Resource Library
- Considering whether some overly technical journal articles could be streamlined or presented in a more accessible style
- Exploring further support for culturally diverse grower groups
- Providing additional monitoring and evaluation training and support for the project team

Strong foundations for the future

Despite the recommendations, the review strongly reinforced the value of the project and the importance of continuing nationally coordinated berry extension services.

The review found:

- The project is aligned with industry priorities
- Growers value access to local IDOs
- The extension model is working well
- Collaboration across states is a major strength
- The project team has developed strong industry trust and credibility



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Perhaps most importantly, the review recognised that the project team has built strong relationships with growers and developed a deep understanding of the challenges facing berry businesses across Australia.

The next challenge will be turning those interactions, insights and engagement activities into clearer evidence of measurable industry impact.

As the project moves into its final phase, the focus will increasingly shift from simply documenting what activities occurred to demonstrating how those activities are helping growers make decisions, adopt new practices and strengthen the long-term profitability and resilience of the Australian berry industry.

How growers can help strengthen the project

The mid-term review found that the project is delivering strong value, but needs better evidence of what growers are learning, using and changing on farm.

Growers can help in several ways:

- Sharing your opinions openly and honestly with the team
- Taking the time to complete feedback surveys after events
- Sharing examples of practice change and agreeing to have this featured in a case study
- Proactively telling IDOs what issues are emerging
- Letting the team know which resources, events and communication formats are most useful and which are not

Even a quick conversation after a workshop or farm visit can help shape future activities and ensure the project continues to deliver practical, relevant support for your berry businesses.

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