

Why 'Get Lost' isn't Always the Smartest Response

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It is no secret that growers of all sizes are overwhelmed by an increasing compliance burden. Small growers are burning the candle at both ends, and medium and large-sized growers are having to employ staff dedicated just to managing red tape, paperwork and audits. In this environment, it is easy to see why growers are not overjoyed when asked to participate in a 'trial', do a survey or collect data to demonstrate good practice.

A knee-jerk response to being approached about participating in a new project or program is to tell the hapless government officer or IDO to get lost. Time is constrained, multiple players want you to 'invest in your business' whilst at the same time taking time away from your business, and everyone else seems to be getting paid except you!

That said, while it might feel satisfying to have a rant and send them on their way, these processes usually exist for good reason. There can also be significant consequences if industry chooses not to engage, particularly when regulatory decisions are being made that will directly affect growers.

Times have changed, and so have community expectations around farming. If industry wants to avoid a heavy-handed regulatory approach, growers need to be willing to engage early and help shape practical solutions. And that means when you're asked for your input, opinion, feedback or whatever it's called that day, giving it openly and honestly could be the smartest response for your business in the long term.

There are still, unfortunately, examples where growers have been left out of important conversations or brought in too late during program development. However, there is also a clear shift towards trusting growers to identify what needs to improve and what will actually work on the ground.

Industry is also increasingly being asked to help co-design and deliver monitoring projects. And yes, 'monitoring' is not exactly a word that fills most growers with enthusiasm, but monitoring and measurement programs can lead to useful outcomes with unexpected benefits.

In the best-case scenario, the results show that growers have already adopted best practice and that key risks are well managed. In other cases, monitoring can identify areas where improvements are needed. That information can then be used to support further grants, extension programs and practical resources to help growers make changes on-farm.

So why get involved? The simple answer is that if the industry is perceived as creating a problem, we should be concerned about fixing it or at least demonstrating that it is not us. You might also be surprised at how much money you can save by reviewing and improving your current practices.

On a more practical note, participating in these programs can also help take the 'heat' out of an issue. An industry that buries its head in the sand risks attracting suspicion, criticism and closer scrutiny. An industry that engages early and proactively is much better placed to stay ahead of social licence concerns, build credibility, and help shape productive, workable strategies instead of being forced into a defensive position later.



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Berries Australia and the IDOs also work hard to filter out the less practical ideas before they ever reach growers. So, if we do come to you asking for input, feedback, or involvement in something new, I encourage you to pause before dismissing it outright. Ask why the program is being developed, what problem it is trying to solve, and whether there may be a benefit for your business or the broader industry.

And importantly, please don't assume your neighbour will do the heavy lifting. Everyone is busy, and strong industry representation only works when a broad range of growers are willing to take part.

If you are concerned about participating in a project, trial or grant program, it is worth asking a few clear questions before you commit:

- Who is funding the project, and who is responsible for delivering it?
- What are the project objectives?
- Will my farm name, business name or location be identified in any published data or reports?
- If I accept a grant, will I be required to attend workshops, host site visits or allow others onto my farm to view the project?
- What happens if the project does not achieve the intended outcome?
- What happens if a monitoring project identifies an issue, such as excess erosion, nutrient loss or another area of concern?

It is also worth remembering that some grant conditions may be negotiable. If you are interested in applying but feel uncertain about the requirements, contact the program delivery partner and/or your local Industry Development Officer for advice. Your IDO can help you understand the conditions, ask the right questions, and in some cases act as an intermediary if you would prefer to remain confidential while you explore your options.

Finally, we understand that participating in a project or trial can feel like one more thing on an already long list. However, growers who have taken part in trials, monitoring projects and grant opportunities often speak positively about the experience, particularly when the project delivers practical insights, funding support or a clearer understanding of what is happening on-farm.

When proactive growers are willing to engage, test ideas and help shape practical solutions, the whole industry benefits. It helps keep berries at the forefront of innovation, supports better environmental outcomes, strengthens community confidence, and protects our social licence to keep producing fresh, healthy food.