



**Dairy Farmer Discussion Group
Resources Kit**

What's in this Resources Kit?

Introduction	1
Dairy Discussion Group Support Package	3
Information to Support Group Success	3
Thoughts from an Experienced Facilitator	5
Fact Sheets for Group Success from Victorian State Government	6
Dairy Discussion Groups	7
Forming a Dairy Discussion Group	8
Coordinating a Dairy Discussion Group	11
Running Meetings	12
More information	13

Introduction

The Australian dairy industry has a long history of group-based activities being an effective extension approach with the peer influence of farmers being a major driver of adoption and practice change. The increasingly diverse nature of the Australian industry, particularly in terms of farming systems, scale of operation and farmer segments makes the facilitation of group activities challenging.

There is a body of research, including extensive evaluation of discussion groups and focus farms in Australia, New Zealand (DairyNZ) and Ireland (Teagasc) that provides insight into what is required to make group-based extension effective.

The following factors contribute to discussion groups being effective and successful in driving change:

- > They are well organised with a planned approach
- > They have well planned activities with a clear sense of purpose
- > There is strong ownership of the group's direction by the farmer members
- > Participants contribute to the cost of running the group and have 'skin in the game'
- > Groups are effectively facilitated
- > Improvement and planning is driven by regular evaluation of the group and its achievements.

Dairy Australia invests in group-based extension and farm change activities that support the adoption and application of new technology and practices, and support farmers to improve farm business management performance. While they go by many names across the industry these can be broadly grouped into Discussion Groups.

This resources kit is designed to help farmers and their advisers to establish and run successful and effective discussion groups.

Dairy Australia works closely with many state governments to help provide services to dairy farmers.





Dairy Farmer Discussion Group Support Package

Dairy Australia is providing funding support for discussion groups with the aim of incentivising groups to carry out activities that add value to the group and provide benefits for the farmers in the group. This funding is channelled through Regional Development Programs (RDPs) with criteria that can be discussed with RDP Executive Officers and Dairy Australia's Extension Coordinators. The funding criteria is designed to provide clear guidance to groups about the need to demonstrate ways the funding will add value to their group and how that will be evaluated.

Support will be provided to initiate new group activities and maintain existing groups that can demonstrate outcomes that provide benefits for farmers.

In return for funding support Dairy Australia expects groups to be well planned and effective with a clear purpose that is aligned to Dairy Australia and regional priorities and requirements as determined by the Regional Development Programs. In the longer term Dairy Australia and the RDP's expect groups that are supported will have a focus on whole farm systems and farm business.

Obtain further information about funding support through Regional Development Programs. Contact details for RDPs can be found in this kit.

Information to Support Group Success

Topic	Resources Overview	Website
Co-ordinating a discussion group	<p>Co-ordinating a discussion group is something that needs to be taken seriously if the group is to succeed.</p> <p>Information provided will help you with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Knowing what to do prior to, during and after a meeting. > Group administration > Management of the group 	<p>www.depi.vic.gov.au/agriculture-and-food/dairy/people-and-networks/dairy-discussion-groups/dairy-discussion-group-coordinators</p>
Starting a dairy discussion group	<p>For people considering joining or forming a dairy farmer discussion group in their local area.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Should a group be formed? > First few steps > Suggestions for positive future action > Getting help 	<p>www.depi.vic.gov.au/agriculture-and-food/dairy/people-and-networks/dairy-discussion-groups/dairy-farmer-discussion-groups</p> <p>www.depi.vic.gov.au/agriculture-and-food/dairy/people-and-networks/dairy-discussion-groups/forming-a-dairy-discussion-group</p>
Running discussion group meetings	<p>Tips on what can help make your group meetings run successfully.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Types of meetings > Running a meeting > Sample format for a group meeting > Meeting checklist 	<p>www.depi.vic.gov.au/agriculture-and-food/dairy/people-and-networks/dairy-discussion-groups/running-meetings</p>



Thoughts from an Experienced Facilitator

The key to getting a group going is having a focussed approach.

A proven approach

A proven approach to a successful meeting is

1. Have a pre-group meeting visit to the host farm. Gather information and identify areas for discussion. This visit helps the coordinator and/or facilitator confirm the host farmer's willingness to have a range of topics discussed on their business. This also provides a visual inspection of potential safety hazards which need to be addressed should the host farm proceed.
2. Spend time on making the farm's operation clearly presentable and safe using analysis and the Dairy Australia's Visiting Farms policy as a guideline.
3. Have a comprehensive feel for the host farm business. This provides knowledge of the key drivers in the success of the business and its potential barriers to success. From this, the coordinator and/or facilitator can help shape the discussion.
4. Always ensure that the host farmer is comfortable with what will be presented to the group.
5. Conclude the session with a summary of the discussion and any opinions or thoughts that have been raised. This allows the group to clarify points of discussion and see that the discussion is targeted towards improvement.
6. As a result attendees will have a good insight into what the host farmer is doing particularly well and take home potential 'successes' to apply to their own farm businesses.

The discussion and role of facilitation

A facilitation role may be suitable to some groups as the dissection of a host farm business can be a delicate discussion.

A facilitator's role is to:

- > Prompt discussion in the areas where there could be improvements in farmer practices and areas of success.
- > Identify the good operators and draw them into the discussion but at the same time make each farmer feel valued and part of the discussion.
- > Be sensitive to what is going on and ensure that discussion is relevant and appropriate. The host farmer needs to have indicated to the group a willingness for farmer input. Without this willingness from the host farmer, participants may be reluctant to appear critical. However a culture of openness gives permission to farmers give their insights into the analysis of the farm business.
- > Gain the trust and confidence of the farmers. If farmers see the facilitator as acting in their interest and incorporating a wide range of opinion and input, this will foster credibility.
- > Manage the transfer of information from individuals including skilled rural professional. This needs to occur in a way that the day is not dominated by one point of view, nor an obvious sales push. In doing this farmers should be given recognition for the value they bring to the discussion.

Groups of common interests

There is a need to form groups around common interests not just general farm management principles. Groups such as these can operate at a level driven by farmers or a facilitator's role if applicable can be more of an organisational one with facilitation on the day. The farmers involved in these groups will often seek out or recommend the speakers they want, and organise or suggest the tours and activities they want to undertake. Encouraging them to drive what they want from the group helps with ownership and participation.

*Information from Rob La Grange,
Dairy Industry Development Officer – Western Australia*

Fact Sheets for Group Success from Victorian State Government:

- > Dairy Discussion Groups
- > Forming a Dairy Discussion Group
- > Coordinating a Dairy Discussion Group
- > Running Meetings



Dairy Discussion Groups

What is a Dairy Discussion Group?

Dairy discussion groups enable dairy farmers to share ideas and learn from each other's experiences.

A dairy farmer discussion group is a group of people engaged in the business of dairy farming. The group may have either a specific focus (eg mastitis) or cover a number of topics throughout the year. Groups can be established to solve a particular problem with a short timeframe or they can be ongoing.

There are many benefits to operating in a group:

- > Dealing with complex issues – small face to face groups enable people to be involved in dealing with issues; small groups are particularly effective in dealing with complex issues, whereas simpler issues/opportunities can be communicated/actioned in larger groups.
- > Capacity building of individuals, groups and communities – group environments are an effective means for developing skills and knowledge.
- > Continuous learning and improvement – groups can enable people to maximise their rate of learning and create an environment for continuous improvement and the implementation of benchmarking.
- > Enabling innovation – groups encourage innovation and new ideas; people are more creative in groups.
- > Networking and learning – groups allow ideas to be effectively communicated and applied; groups can enhance networking and learning; groups enable a pooling of skills and knowledge from individuals.
- > Effectiveness and efficiency of work – groups encourage the workload to be spread according to skills and roles.

Objective of the Dairy Discussion Group

A common feature of successful groups is that they have strong aims or direction. Clear objectives help to focus and unite a group. The coordinator needs to clarify these so members know what the aims and objectives are and regularly assess whether the group is meeting these as well as individual needs of its members. If groups do not meet individual's needs, people lose motivation to participate in groups.



*Information from Natalie Nelson,
DEPI Dairy Services Branch, Leongatha*

Forming a Dairy Discussion Group

Should we form a Dairy Discussion Group?

Before attempting to form a dairy farmer discussion group, it is important to find out if there is already one in your area. This can be done by contacting your local state agricultural department office or Dairy Australia's Regional Development Program. If an established group will meet your needs, there is little point in forming yet another group.

If other groups do exist but do not meet your needs or those of the other potential group members, you will need to explore the potential group membership and focus.

Establishing a group

The questions to ask are:

- > What does the group want to achieve? Groups will have a better chance of surviving if the members are geographically within 30-min drive of one another, if they are of a similar enterprise or if they have a common focus.
- > What is your group's focus?
- > Which people should be involved? A group includes many different types of people, such as dairy farmers, farm advisors and other professionals who work in the industry. Often some diversity is essential to the success of the group.

Who will coordinate and/or facilitate the group?

- > Decide early on who will coordinate the group. When a group is farmer driven, training is available to equip them with the skills necessary to coordinate, run and evaluate the group's activities.
- > Then decide whether the group will use a facilitator to conduct the meetings. If a service provider such as a consultant is used, then facilitation costs will need to be considered. Some groups then charge a membership fee to cover these costs.

Steps in forming a new group

1. Advertise that you want to start a group in a dairy newsletter, factory news or local papers.
2. Generate interest by speaking to the farmers you know are interested and get them to recruit a few extra people.
3. Hold a preliminary meeting to generate or gauge the level of interest in forming a group.
4. At the initial meeting, record the names and contact details of those attending so you can follow up potential membership.
5. Outline the opportunities that exist for groups for funding such as small grants that are available through Dairy Australia's Regional Development Programs.
6. Set the group's terms of reference with a group of core farmers that appear interested in forming a discussion group.

This means identifying the:

- Primary group contact
 - First topics that you will cover
 - Venues
 - Group boundaries and rules,
 - Responsibility for invitations and reminders.
7. Ensure that the first day is clearly advertised giving enough notice and generally sending reminders. Make sure the day is targeted to meet a specific need suggested by the farmers.

Ensuring the success of your group

The success of your group will depend on a number of things including:

- > Appropriate group size for purpose
- > Clear focus, aim or objective
- > Revisit goals of group often and measure progress
- > Clear boundaries and ground rules, such as confidentiality
- > Clear expectations, roles and responsibilities
- > Degree of enthusiasm/willingness of participants
- > Addition of some social activities
- > Revisit the goals of the group and individual's needs to ensure the group is on target
- > Relevance of issue or topic chosen
- > Resources assured (fees or funding)
- > Skilled facilitator and support staff assured, if relevant
- > Skills training appropriate for roles
- > Respect for other people's views and opinions.

Setting the group focus

A way of getting ideas on the group's goals is to run a brainstorming session and try to answer the following questions:

- > What dairy farm issues most concern the group?
- > What employment management issues most concern the group?
- > What farm business management issues most concern the group?
- > How should the group tackle these issues in the next three, six, twelve or 24 months?

By discovering the main issues the group can then look at short and long term priorities and set realistic and achievable goals.

Other points to consider

- > An internal communication system is useful to ensure all members are kept informed and up-to-date with dairy discussion news.
- > Support to dairy farmer discussion groups is available from a range of people and organisations in a variety of forms from government departments, industry, Dairy Australia's Regional Development Programs and other dairy farmer discussion group members.
- > At the first few meetings:
 - Encourage people to wear name badges for the first few meetings to help members to get to know one another.
 - Have each member introduce themselves and why they have become involved with the group. This may encourage people to feel more relaxed and part of the group.
 - Ask questions of members.
 - Early meetings should have a sense of purpose.
 - Members should leave with a sense of achievement and a feeling that the group is moving towards worthwhile goals.
 - Diversify your activities to encourage people to join you in working towards the goals of your dairy discussion group.

What if the group doesn't form?

If it does not work, or there is no interest - certainly do not blame yourself or others. There just isn't a need for farmers in your area to form another group.



*Information from Natalie Nelson,
DEPI Dairy Services Branch, Leongatha*



Coordinating a Dairy Discussion Group

Purpose of the group

The primary purpose of the group is to provide a forum suitable for learning to take place. Farmers learn from seeing, listening and most importantly doing. By providing a place for farmers to openly discuss farming issues, it is more conducive for farmers to think and gain ideas on a particular issue.

Long term or ongoing groups will also provide a great social network. This network is valuable for sounding out ideas and enables farmers to get off their own farm and explore.

Administration

General tasks

General administrative tasks are to:

- > Provide notice of upcoming meetings via flyers, telephone, fax, email or SMS or social media.
- > Organise guest speakers.
- > Organising refreshments and venue hire, if relevant.
- > Plan meetings.
- > Organise who is responsible for each task or activity.
- > Register your dairy farmer discussion group with your Dairy Australia's Regional Development Program. Registration puts you on the database to receive information and access to funding opportunities.

Venues, liability & insurance

- > Ensure that host farms and venues, where relevant, have current public liability insurance.
- > For all farm venues consider biosecurity and OHS risks and ask either your Dairy Australia RDP or Extension Coordinator to put you in touch with someone who can assist with conducting a risks and hazards audit.

Membership fees

It is up to your group to decide on a policy for membership fees. Groups that charge a membership fee use the money to meet administrative costs or employing a group facilitator.

Privacy of members

The Privacy Act 2001 ensures that group member information is not used in a manner other than that which it was collected for.

If unsure of the details of the Act visit <http://www.oaic.gov.au/>

When to have meetings

Meetings can be held monthly, bimonthly, quarterly, seasonally, or whatever is thought appropriate for your group.

Keep it interesting

Meetings need to be interesting incorporating events to ensure that people go away with information or with a feeling of having gained something from the meeting.

Resources for group coordinators

1. External speakers can be very helpful to the group. Before engaging a speaker check that the group will be happy to have them attend.
2. Get in touch with other group coordinators. Your local Agricultural Department and Dairy Australia's Regional Development Program may be able to help with giving contact details for these people.
3. Use the internet to come up with possible topics. Also be aware of your local dairy calendar of events and use this for planning event dates.
4. Group members can be very useful in providing topic suggestions and guest speakers. Having an annual planning meeting of the group will allow them to contribute to the group and help make coordinating the group easier.

Other options

Some of the options you may consider for meetings include:

- > Farm walks
- > Trips to different groups to see what they are doing
- > Trips to new enterprises in the area
- > Christmas (or other celebratory) dinners
- > Video and/or webinar sessions
- > A 'Paddock to Plate' tour

A quick meeting can be slotted into any of these activities. In this way members are kept up-to-date as well as benefiting from the event.

Remember that not everyone is going to be interested in every topic. Therefore not all members will be at every meeting. Try to cater for the different interests and needs of the group members to get good participation.

Getting help

There are many professional discussion group leaders. Do not feel that you have to be the one to always coordinate the group. The tasks involved in running a group are time consuming and sometimes require others to share the load.



Information from Natalie Nelson,
DEPI Dairy Services Branch, Leongatha

Running meetings

Most group meetings will be located on a group member's farm or at a host farm although this does not exclude the group from visiting other points of interest. The meetings may be formal, informal or on farm days.

Tips for Running Effective meetings

- > Stick to time limits to help meetings run smoothly. The group needs to set meeting times that suit the majority of members.
- > Choose a suitable agenda dependant on the type of meeting you are running, topics, times and who is responsible for each day or topic.

A Checklist for meetings

The following checklist is only a guide. You may use this guide, develop one of your own, or decide that you don't need one.

Before the meeting:

- > Book host farm or venue
- > Book speaker (if required). Contact them and discuss their presentation, arrival time, any special arrangements, equipment or notes
- > Ensure venue is a safe venue (Ask your Dairy Australia RDP or Extension Coordinator to put you in touch with someone who can conduct an audit if necessary)
- > Notify group members and interested people of meeting date, agenda and times via a phone call, flyer, letter, email, SMS or social media
- > Purchase tea, coffee, biscuits, cups, sugar, milk
- > Organise urn & extension lead
- > Organise whiteboard, overhead projector and screen etc
- > Organise pens and pencils and spare paper/notepads
- > Provide butchers paper and markers
- > Photocopy any handouts or notes
- > Advertise group meeting day in local paper if desired or required.

At the meeting:

- > Find out or re-state what the group goals for the day are
- > Encourage all members to participate
- > Allow plenty of time for questions
- > Provide a reasonably informal or comfortable environment
- > Check that participants have the information they need
- > Ensure the group has met its objectives by providing a quick and easy evaluation form
- > Discuss the topic, date, location and any requirements for the next meeting.

Between meetings:

- > Help the host clean up
- > Complete tasks assigned, keep in touch with other members particularly those who also have jobs to do

- > Distribute an action sheet of any tasks assigned during the meeting
- > Encourage new members to join and participate in group activities.

Facilitating a meeting (suggested outline)

Opening

Welcome the group, introduce key speakers (if any) and define the topic. Invite comments and encourage participation of group members.

Give a quick overview of what this meeting is all about including the agenda and group rules (if necessary).

Goals and problems

Define the goals and problems the group, host or guest speaker wishes to cover in the meeting. Encourage participants to focus on common issues and assign priorities.

Solutions and opportunities

Invite comments and ideas from the members. Record and display their comments regarding action plans and solutions. Invite participants to prioritise options.

Action plan

Describe the following (where additional information is needed assign responsibility to the logical person): Action steps; Materials needed; Timelines and training; Schedules; Costs. (If any)

Summary and next steps

- > Review ideas
- > Describe what happens next
- > Research the ideas generated
- > Follow up with the group
- > Generate action items for follow-up.

Notes and/or actions list

Regardless of the formality, a record should be kept of any decisions or actions made and who is responsible for following up. A record of the proceedings of meetings is good to keep as they provide the group with:

- > A reference and guide for the future
- > Reports on matters of importance
- > An attendance record.

An action list can be used to:

- > Prioritise jobs
- > Identify who will do them
- > Set a deadline.

More information

If you require more information please contact your Regional Development Program:



Dairy NSW
02 9351 1737
dairynsw.com.au



Murray Dairy
03 5833 5312
murraydairy.com.au



DairySA
08 8766 0127
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0431 197 479
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03 6432 2233
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