



Dairy Farmer Discussion Groups

Natalie Nelson, Leongatha

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This Agriculture Note provides guidance for people considering joining or forming a dairy farmer discussion group in their local area. Topics covered include points to consider before getting started, the first few steps and suggestions for positive future action. It aims to increase the likelihood of success when participating in a discussion group.

What is a Dairy Farmer Discussion Group?

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 may wish to cover a number of topics throughout the year. Groups can be established to solve a particular problem within a short time frame (called a Learning Group) or can be ongoing.

There are a large number of dairy farmer discussion groups around the state of Victoria, with groups in each region operating differently.

Should we form a dairy discussion group?

Before attempting to form a dairy discussion group, it is important to find out if there is already one in your area. This can be done by contacting your local DPI office.

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.

See Agriculture Note AG0865: "Forming a Dairy Discussion Group" for further information.

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* – a group environment is 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 benchmarking to be implemented

- *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; they 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

Potential members

A group includes many different types of people. Often this diversity is essential to the success of the group.

Local dairy farmers, sharefarmers, lessees, dairy farm employees, young farmers, nearby landholders, local rural business representatives, local consultants, milk factory field staff, stock and station agents, shire council members, regional water authority members or the government extension officers may all be potential members of your group.

Objective of the dairy farmer 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 group will need to decide whether they wish to cover a specific topic or whether many different topics will be covered during the year. These topics need to be planned in advance but be flexible to take on new and emerging issues for the group.

If groups do not meet individual's needs, people lose motivation to participate in groups. Ensure members know what the aims and objectives are and regularly assess whether the group is meeting individual's needs.

Established local groups

Investigate groups that are currently established in your community. Many rural people are often over committed and already part of one or more groups or voluntary

organisations. If an established group will meet your needs, there is little point in forming yet another group.

Who will run the group?

There are a number of ways to go about setting up a group. Decide early on whether the group will be run by a service provider or run by farmers. If a service provider such as a consultant is used then a cost is usually associated with membership of that group.

If a farmer would like to run the discussion group, training is available to equip the farmer with the skills necessary to coordinate, run and evaluate the group's activities. The group may even decide to pay the group organiser for their expenses and time.

Catering for dairy farmer discussion group days

As most dairy farmer discussion group days are on farm, the venue for refreshments can be the kitchen, the carport or shed depending on group member numbers.

It is assumed that the venue host will provide tea, coffee, milk sugar etc. Most members will be happy to bring their own lunch. The venue will usually require power for an urn or kettle.

Group boundaries

It is ideal for farmers involved in the dairy discussion group to be located within a local geographic boundary. Although not exclusive it will ensure that members do not have to travel too far to group days and encourages understanding of localised issues (i.e. climatic). Any interested farmer would be welcome to attend activities.

Group administration

Dairy discussion groups must address several administrative issues:

Registering your dairy discussion group

Your group should register as a dairy farmers discussion group with your Regional Dairy Industry Board, GippsDairy, WestVic Dairy or Murray Dairy.

Registration puts you on the database to receive dairy discussion information and access to small grants programs that are available through the dairy regional development boards and other industry funds.

Insurance for groups

Suitable insurance should be in place for any on farm activities – this is described below.

If you are holding an event on private property (as most discussion group days usually are), you need to check that the property owner has public liability cover to protect them if a third party is injured on their property. Once again, negligence must be demonstrated - (in this case, negligence by the property owner).

If your group employs a full or part-time coordinator, you must take out WorkCover insurance. WorkCover is Victoria's workers compensation system and cannot be replaced by any other form of insurance. This may not

apply to contract employees such as consultants, who have their own insurance.

Membership fees

Some dairy discussion groups charge a membership fee, which may be used to meet administrative costs (Postage, tea, coffee, photocopying) or other costs (such as employing a consultant to coordinate the group throughout the year).

Other groups believe that membership fees reduce potential member numbers. It is up to your group to decide on a policy for membership fees. Most often the supply of refreshments on the host farm negates the need for membership fees.

Privacy Laws

The Privacy Act 2000 determines the use of group lists for an approved purpose only. For further information and collection of group member information see the Privacy Victoria website <http://www.privacy.gov.au/>

Setting the group focus

Short and long term priorities

Usually when a group forms it is some time before it has a clear idea of what its objectives are and how it will achieve its goals.

A short term goal may be something which can be covered within one year (e.g. coping with deregulation paperwork) whereas long term goals may be to have the group average mastitis count down to 150,000 in 3 years time.

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 management issues most concern the group? (Usually it will identify five to eight.)
- How should the group tackle these issues in the next three, six, twelve or twenty-four months?

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

A facilitator from DPI may be willing to conduct this brainstorming activity for your group or you may wish for the appointed group leader to conduct this exercise.

Other points to consider

Communication

An internal contact system is useful to ensure all members are kept informed and up-to-date with dairy discussion news. The type of system is up to the group; options include newsletters and telephone call relays. The other systems which may be adopted include fax or email discussion. The only requirement is that it is known and agreed upon by the group.

Support

Support to dairy discussion groups is available from a range of people and organisations in a variety of forms.

Technical and advisory support is available from the Department of Primary Industries. Other service providers in the industry may be contactable on an individual basis.

A list of key dairy farmer discussion group resources is available on the Target 10 website, [http://Target 10.com/](http://Target10.com/) and see the *Discussion Groups* menu.

Other dairy discussion groups can be a source of encouragement and technical information. They may also provide new ideas for group management and a discussion forum for regional issues. Ways of networking with other groups may be through newsletters, personal contacts, field days, workshops and conferences.

The first few meetings

Encourage people to wear name badges for the first few meetings to help members to get to know one another.

Ask questions of members. Each member could introduce themselves and why they have become involved with the group. This may encourage people to feel more relaxed and a part of the group.

Early meetings should have a sense of purpose. If nothing else, members should leave with a sense of achievement and a feeling that the group is moving towards worthwhile goals.

Remember that a group includes many different types of people. Not everyone wants to attend farm walks, working bees or meetings. Diversify your activities and more people will join you in working towards the goals of your dairy discussion group.

Ensuring the Success of your group

The success of your group will depend on a number of things, but include:

- Appropriate group size for purpose
- Clear focus, aim or objective
- Revisit goals of group often and measure progress
- Clear boundaries and ground rules
- Clear expectations, roles and responsibilities
- Degree of enthusiasm/willingness of participants
- Enjoyable social activities (for a job well done)
- Good interpersonal relationships
- Individual's needs met
- Relevance of issue or topic chosen
- Resources assured (fees or funding)
- Skilled facilitator and support staff assured
- Skills training appropriate for roles
- Respect for other people's views and opinions
- Confidentiality



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

Further Information:

Further information is available in the Agriculture Notes:

AG0865: Forming a Dairy Discussion Group

AG0758: Dairy Discussion Group Coordinators

AG0759: Running Dairy Discussion Group Meetings

Or ring the Customer Information Centre on 136 186 or Target 10 Website <http://www.target10.com/>

Dairy Extension Officers are based at the following DPI offices:

Cobram

Hay Avenue, Cobram Vic. 3644
(03) 5872 1899

Colac

State Public Offices
83-85 Gellibrand Street, Colac Vic. 3250
(03) 5233 5533

Echuca

Corner Ogilvie Avenue & Annesley Street,
Echuca Vic. 3625
(03) 5482 1922

Ellinbank

Hazeldean Road, Ellinbank, Warragul Vic. 3820
(03) 5624 2222

Kyabram

Cooma Road, Kyabram Vic. 3620
(03) 5852 0500

Leongatha

12 Peart Street, Leongatha Vic. 3953
(03) 5662 9900

Maffra

1 Stratford Road, Maffra Vic. 3860
(03) 5139 0122

Warrnambool

78 Henna Street, Warrnambool Vic. 3280
(03) 5561 9950

Wodonga

1 McKoy Street, Wodonga Vic. 3690
(02) 6055 6111

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