



KEY TO ACTION GROUP SUCCESS

Access to experts with specific skills to add value to farming businesses is a primary outcome from the Red Meat Profit Partnership (RMPP) Action Groups, facilitator Sarah Bell says.

Sarah is a trained facilitator, drawn from the spectrum of rural professionals across the country, who are supporting the farmer-led Action Groups to identify goals and subject matter experts (SMEs) who can share new knowledge and ideas.

Each group is made up of seven to nine farm businesses and receives \$4000 kick-start funding for each. This is pooled for the group to pay for facilitation and subject matter experts on their topics of choice.

Sarah says the funding is hugely valuable. Her Waimarino group, which comprises nine farm businesses, has had an expert speak at every group session to date.

Beef and sheep farmer, Hamish Blackburn, a member of that group, echoes Sarah's views, but says the facilitation is vital too.

"The Action Group is really good, but you couldn't do it without the facilitator," he says. "Sarah points us in the right direction and gets the ball rolling. She has a very similar background to members too - we all relate to her."

RMPP began rolling out the RMPP Action Network late in 2017 and more than 960 farm businesses are now involved, with 115 regionally spread Action Groups.

The groups bring together farmers with similar aims and matches them with facilitators with the skills to support them in developing a farm action plan and accessing subject matter experts to help achieve shared goals.

Sarah, who facilitates three groups, lives on her family's beef and sheep farm

in Taihape. After studying for a degree in physical geography she worked for a local authority in resource consenting, for Fonterra's customer service team and as a fertiliser rep' for Ballance Agri-Nutrients.

She also spent four years sharemilking alongside farm consulting and operational management for a four-farm syndicate with 4800 cows.

She undertook the Kellogg Rural Leadership Programme at Lincoln and combines her Action Group role with facilitating the Understanding Your Farm Business programme funded by RMPP and delivered by the Agri Women's Development Trust.

"When the Action Group opportunity came up, I saw it as a very cool way to get some groups going regionally, with some incredible funding behind them," she says. "I was one of the first to do the facilitator training."

"Before RMPP, most extension activity was discussion groups. I liked the idea of catering to the 60% of farmers who are not involved in discussion groups. "A major difference from discussion groups is that we do pre-work and post-work. Nothing

arduous but we have the subject matter expert sessions and I ask people to look at something or try it on the farm and we recap at the next meeting. This cements the learning."

Sarah worked with a local Rabobank Rural Manager Mike Russell and farm consultant Kate Berry to bring together the Waimarino farm businesses - 'shoulder-tapping' the nine businesses.

"When you first bring a group together you don't have much goodwill with



Sarah Bell, RMPP facilitator.

them," she says. "So, I devised the shortest way to get through necessary organisation, with a workshop to set the group's culture and goals and then straight into the learning."

"My groups' goals are all around productivity and profitability. The groups generally have a few different areas where they can tweak their systems and businesses to get them performing better. For instance, by changing the way they are grazing, monitoring lamb growth rates pre and post weaning, through better use of feed across the whole system, selection of genetics and better financial knowledge."

Hamish says the approach worked well. The fourth-generation member of his family to farm his land, he has a degree in business studies, majoring in agribusiness.

He and his wife Carla are partners in the 880-hectare farm business near Ohakune. They farm sheep and beef, graze dairy weaners and lease 40-50ha for potatoes.

"Everyone in our group is in a similar position to us. We are all sheep and beef farmers around Ohakune, on family farms and most are dealing with succession. We brainstormed ideas and threw everything at Sarah."

Our group has bonded really well. You tend to find everyone is doing something better on their farm, so there is a lot of

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Hamish Blackburn: 'you couldn't do it without the facilitator'.

sharing of ideas and support. I've already made some tweaks to the way I do things, as a result of being involved."


So far, the group has had sessions with agronomist and farm systems analyst Tom Fraser, financial farm accountant Lawrence Field and senior beef and sheep analyst Mel Croad from AgriHQ.

"All have been very valuable and Lawrence's was a revelation," Sarah says. "The group wasn't sure initially that they needed that input but they absolutely loved it."

"Lawrence talked about understanding taxation and the benefits of different kinds of financial structures, livestock tax, the role of your accountant, understanding financial statements and what the book transactions actually mean."

"That was really beneficial," Hamish says. "People tend to think of accountancy as a dry topic but Lawrence was a very good speaker with a great sense of humour and spot on the topics we needed to know about."

The group already has five more SMEs booked, including a return visit by Tom Fraser, and sessions on feed budgeting, cattle and stock policies, including cost benefit analysis, health and safety and HR environmental compliance and farm assurance programmes.

"The big thing is attitude, mindset and commitment to the group," Sarah says. "This group is really committed - at least one member of every farming business attends the meetings and often the couples attend together. There's a lot of trust, they are bouncing ideas off one another and achieving at a very high level." 

More? www.actionnetwork.co.nz