

Priority Issues for Grain Growers in the Western Murray

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Key Issues

Information depicted in this survey was collected by the Western Murray Land Improvement Group Inc. (WMLIG) via Survey Monkey using the group’s email, newsletter, social media and website networks. Information was collated by WMLIG project officer, Laura Kaylock under the supervision of community support officer Roger Knight. Data was collected from 14 respondents living in the western Murray region.

Respondents were asked to identify three key local and national issues which would be likely to gain community support. Each answer was summarised into the following categories:

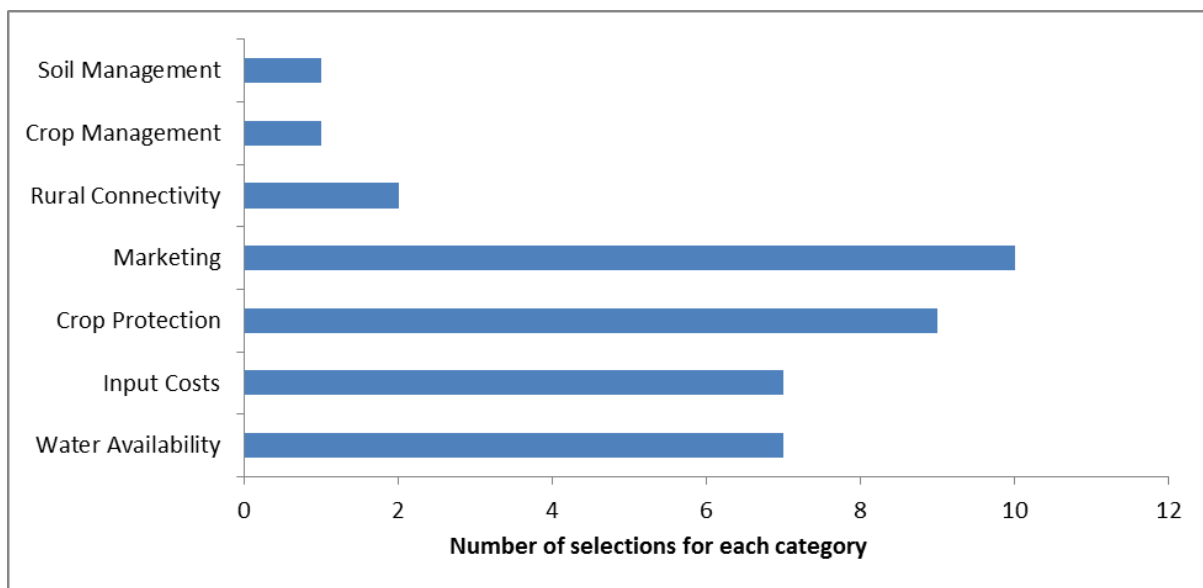


Figure 1: Key issues identified by grain growers in the western Murray region

The key issues identified were:

- 27% of producers identified **Marketing** as the main issue impacting producers in the western Murray.
 - 60% of these people classified it as a *high priority* which has *improved, worsened or remained unchanged* over the past five years
 - Issues within this category included:

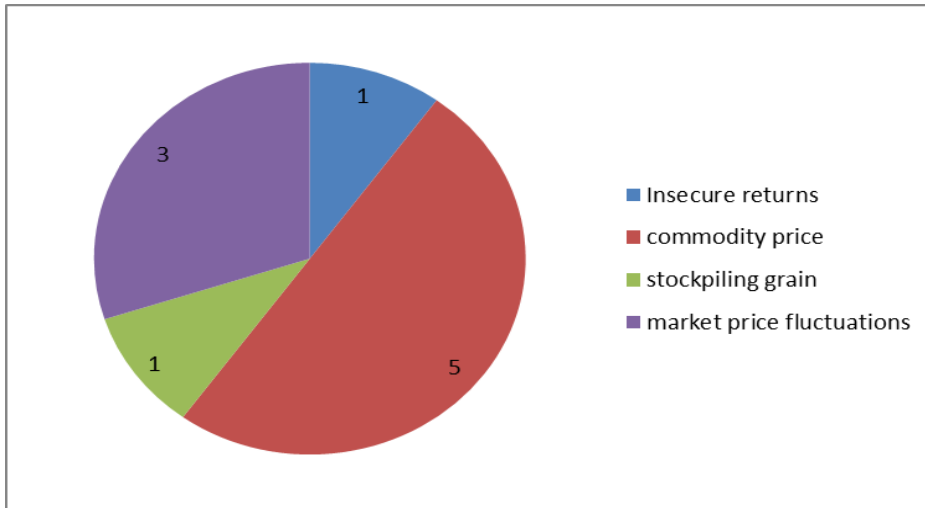


Figure 2: marketing issues identified by respondents; data is classified by number of respondents per issue

Farmers identified that commodity price was the greatest constraint on their business, with low marketing power from the grower in the commercial market. The ‘price taker’ nature of their position has resulted in a narrow margin for the grower. Market price fluctuations have been a constant source of risk in farming enterprises. This is exacerbated by the lack of marketing power held by growers, as they are not only impacted by the world market but also by re-seller margins. This in turn, lends to the insecure returns also identified above. Stockpiling grain both domestically and internationally has a heavy implication on individual commodity markets, better knowledge of these factors when marketing produce is needed.

- 24% of producers identified **Crop Protection** as a key issue
 - 67% of farmers in this category classified it as a *high priority* issue which has become *worse* over the past five years
 - Issues in this category included:

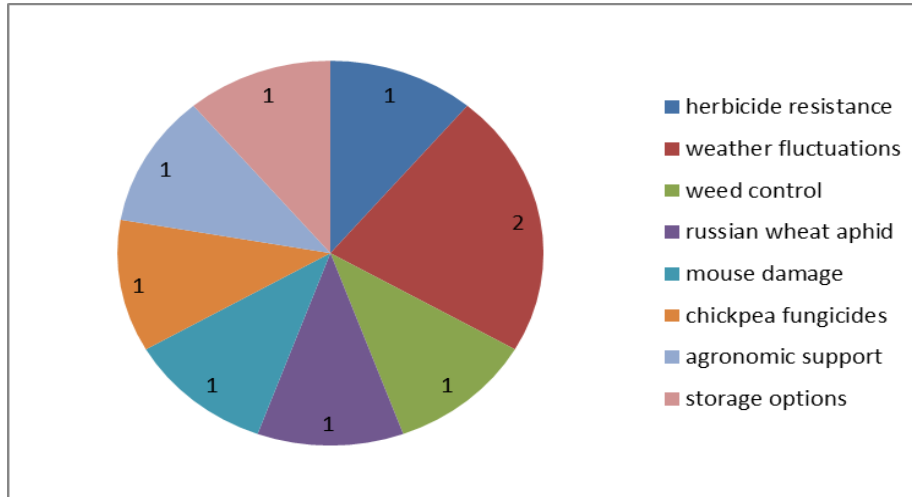


Figure 3: crop protection issues identified by respondents; data is classified by number of respondents per issue

There were a diverse number of responses in terms of crop protection needs for growers in the western Murray region. Weather fluctuations are not something we can control, but better options to manage this risk are needed. Priorities include: continued improvement of drought and frost tolerance in wheat, barley, canola, peas and lentils. Waterlogging tolerance and fungicide options for irrigated pulses such as lentils and chickpeas has also been identified as important. Group A and B herbicide resistance is becoming prevalent in this region due to a lack of rotation and break crop options suitable for heavy, sodic soils. More research specific to this agroecological zone is needed.

Mouse control has been an ongoing problem for growers in the area with pest numbers fluctuating seasonally. More awareness of best practice for rodent control is needed within businesses. Continued research on the management of new pests such as the Russian Wheat Aphid is necessary to ensure that initial economic thresholds and insecticide options are appropriate and affordable.

Grain storage on-farm has been increasing in this region, with investment in silos and grain bags becoming more common. More workshops to increase awareness about maintaining grain quality on-farm is needed. It should be noted that WMLIG held a grain storage and information day in 2017 with Peter Botta to discuss this topic which was well received.

Finally, farmers feel that there is a lack of independent agronomic advice and much of the information they are provided with is commercially motivated.

- 19% of producers identified **Water Availability** and **Input Costs** as a key issue
 - 86% and 71% of farmers classified them as *high priority* issues which have become *worse* over the past five years
 - Issues within these categories included:

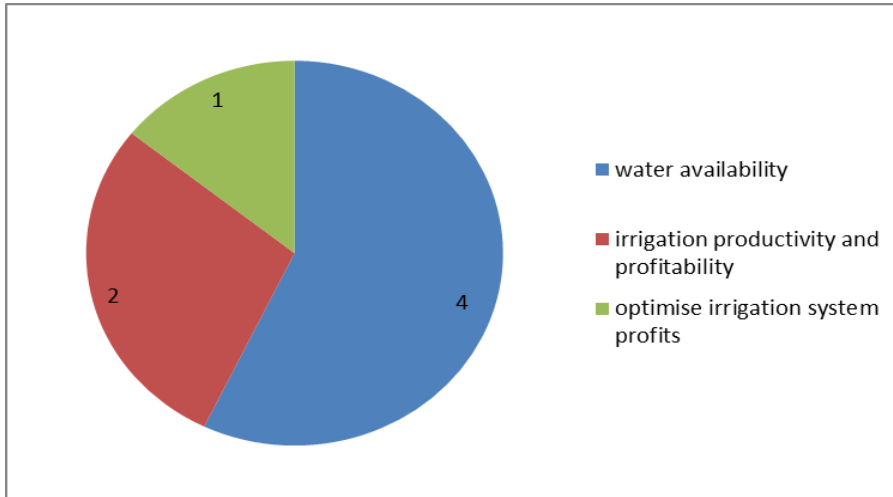


Figure 4: water availability issues identified by respondents; data is classified by number of respondents per issue

Water availability is a core concern for farmers in the western Murray. Many of our farmers are mixed irrigation and dryland or entirely irrigation dependent cropping enterprises. After the water reform relating to the Murray Darling Basin Plan, many growers in the area sold a large portion of their water entitlements. This has resulted in uncertainty in rotation planning for farmers and altered business objectives. There is little we can do about water availability in general, but there is a large amount of opportunity for the improvement of irrigated cropping productivity. Essentially it is important to generate a higher return per megalitre due to the rising input cost of water. There has been some research on irrigation layout optimisation and irrigation scheduling, however this needs to be continued to achieve reliable recommendations for the adoption of improved layouts and water management.

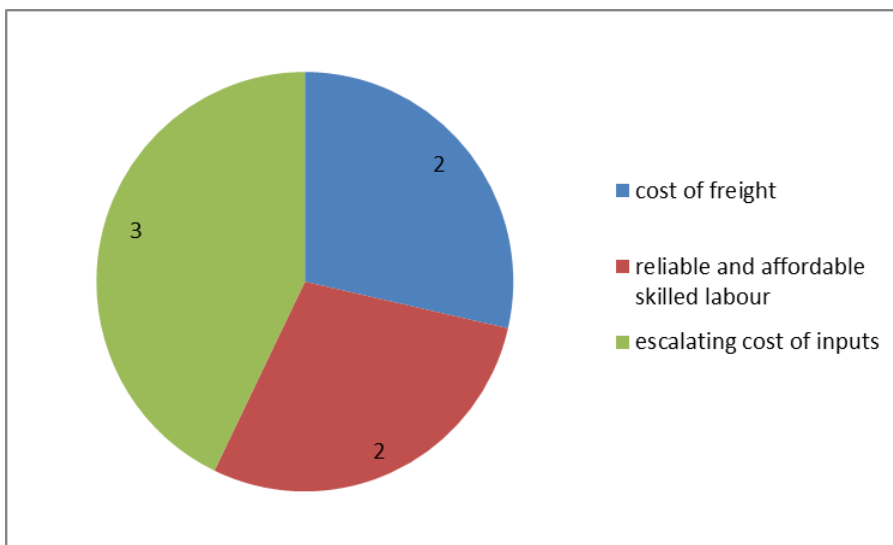


Figure 5: input costs issues identified by respondents; data is classified by number of respondents per issue

The escalation of input costs was the most constraining factor identified by farmers in this category. The main thinking behind this is that costs have increased in line with inflation, but commodity prices have not. Hence returns are much lower for the grower. The cost of freight is a large factor in this. Many train lines are no longer used and as a result, growers are responsible for the cost of carting their grain by truck to ports over 400km away. Labour cost and availability is also an issue, with affordable labour usually coming from unskilled backpackers who are only looking for seasonal work. The expense of hiring skilled, permanent staff is often prohibitive.

Why issues have become worse over time

Reasons given for issues becoming worse include:

MARKETING

- Insecure returns due to market fluctuations
- Stockpiling grain in other countries
- Need more marketing options

CROP PROTECTION

- Lack of chemical/crop rotation choices
- New pest incursions
- Lack of consultation on grower needs
- Lack of rain during the growing season
- Government policy of user pays for research and advice

WATER AVAILABILITY

- Reduced irrigation water availability means more productivity is needed per megalitre
- Farm management is slow to adapt to new water policies. Farmers are now unsure of how to structure their investments
- Irrigators becoming more accustomed to using the water market and have to compete with other high value sectors

INPUT COSTS

- Inflation increasing costs
- Temporary water price has increased due to higher demand through reduction in available pool after recovery through the Basin Plan. Exacerbated by uncertainty around allocation announcement causing volatility in the market
- Lack of government support

Solutions to these issues

Solutions suggested for the above issues include:

MARKETING

Farmers suggested that they would like more information on niche marketing opportunities such as product branding for regional areas, with the aim of improving product placement and marketing power. They also suggested that more ongoing information on Free Trade agreements and resulting opportunities with major markets would help to alleviate market fluctuations in some high value crops such as Chickpeas.

The collation of data from a number of research agencies with information on marketing and financial business strategies would help to provide ideas on economic enhancement of farms. This would be most user-friendly if produced via a presentation or workshop format.

CROP PROTECTION

Farmers felt that they are lacking quality advice due to the lack of independent government funded agronomists now available. They feel that a regional agronomist/extension officer could be funded through grower levies to provide advice on major agronomic issues within each region. This role is already partially covered within the Murray Local Land Services; however they are no longer able to carry out much on-farm extension due to a change in the structure of their roles.

As alluded to above, continued research on varietal characteristics which have the ability to improve the resilience of wheat, barley, canola, peas and lentils to drought and frost damage is needed to improve reliability of yield.

The adoption of high value crops such as chickpeas and lentils into cropping systems in the western Murray has led to a need for more agronomic information on the management of irrigated pulses on heavy soils, especially in terms of irrigation management and fungicide use.

Further research into crop suitability and weed management is needed in the agroecological zone to negate the rapid increase in group A and B herbicide resistance. A more diverse rotation (with less of

a concentration on wheat and barley) is necessary to enable a wider range of chemical and non-chemical control options for ryegrass in particular.

More awareness of best practice for rodent control is needed within businesses. Making notes more easily accessible on this topic and supporting presenters will help to improve pest management. Presentations on the current research for economic thresholds and chemical options for Russian Wheat Aphid would also aid grower confidence in managing the new pest.

WATER AVAILABILITY

Water availability can be increased through the improvement of irrigated cropping productivity. Some ways of achieving this include 'double-cropping' summer and winter crops subsequently to use excess moisture from flooded crops such as rice to improve the water-limited yield potential of a winter cereal such as wheat. Research in this area has been led by Rice Extension (AgriFutures) and NSW DPI with some on-farm trials run by the Moulamein Cropping Group. This has been a good start but could use further backing as there is such a diverse range of issues associated with double-cropping. Examples include: waterlogging during establishment, uneven germination, nutrient tie-up, stubble management and layout suitability.

Recent research from NSW DPI has identified wide variation in waterlogging associated with irrigation layouts. This was as a result of inefficient layouts and soil characteristics such as high sodicity. These impacts were most notable for the productivity of winter cereals. More information is needed on 'best practice' for irrigation layouts which will maximise the potential of both summer and winter crops.

To increase awareness of water use and improve planning confidence in irrigation a whole farm water management plan could be designed and implemented for growers in the western Murray, similar to what is already available to Cotton growers through WATERpak. The aim would be to measure water use across farm and to forecast a range of allocation scenarios to aid long-term planning, rather than growers reacting to short-term forecasts and allocation announcements for their decision-making.

INPUT COSTS

Research into alternatives to decrease cost of freight is needed to help alleviate some input costs associated with transport of grain, fertilisers, seed and much more. Ideas for this include: formation of cooperatives for the sole purpose of transporting bulk product, analysing economics of rejuvenating old train lines and bringing processing plants closer to rural locations rather than in cities.

In terms of the cost and availability of labour it was suggested that visa extension options should be researched in addition to the potential for specialist job agencies to be opened for agricultural employees.

Grain grower contributions

Local producers were asked what grain growers could contribute toward solving the issues they identified. Results can be seen below, with 50% of growers suggesting that they could contribute on-farm knowledge and 25% suggesting they could test or support research.

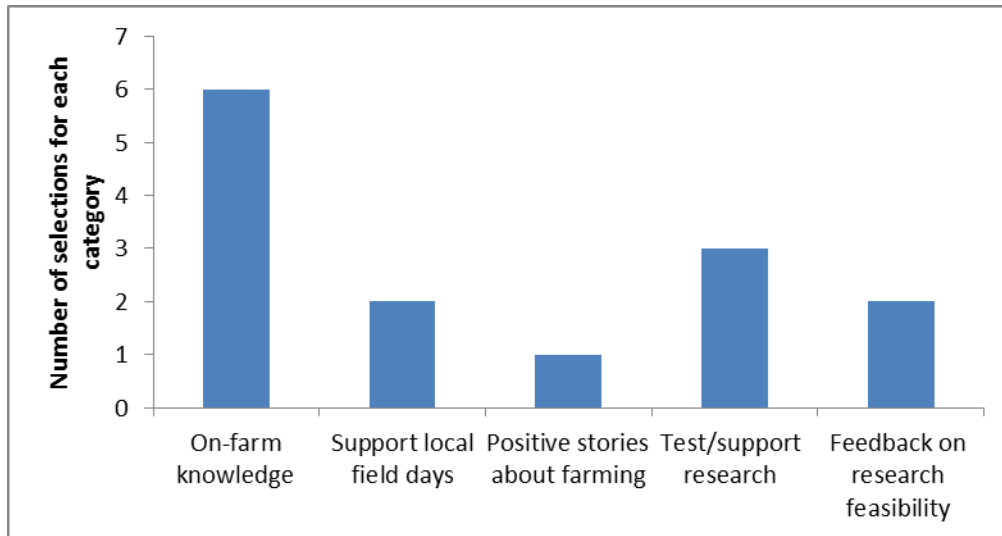


Figure 6: The contributions grain growers are willing to provide in relation to solving key issues.

GRDC R&D priorities

The key issues discussed above correspond with the following development priorities listed in the Grains Research and Development Corporation Strategic Research and Development Plan 2012-17:

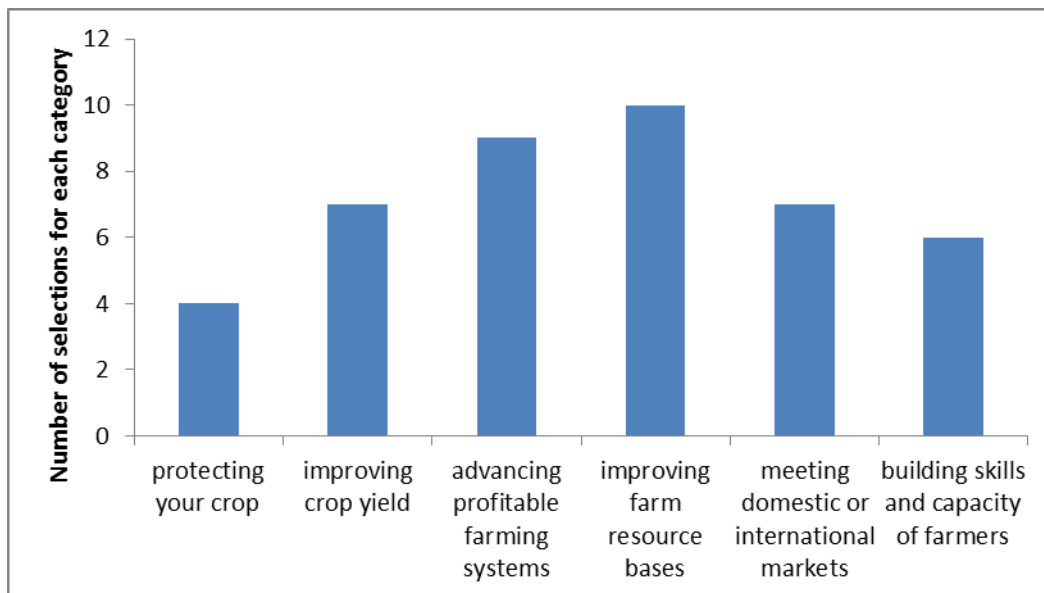


Figure 7: The alignment between key issues identified by grain growers in the western Murray and the GRDC research and development priorities.

The majority of key issues identified by producers related to *'improving farm resource bases'* followed by *'advancing profitable farming systems'*.