



Engagement and Communication

Project awareness was communicated broadly through the region through the AIR EP Newsletter, dedicated website and social media as well as an internal project newsletter called the RIG Report to update those most closely involved with what was happening and coming out of the project. RIG meetings provided a very effective opportunity for interaction with researchers and developing mutual understanding around soil water management. Broader messaging in relation to taking action was dependant on the findings from the project trials, with limited data available in the early to mid-stages of the project – momentum in this area increased in the final year. Project outcomes will continue to impact on available information and advice and informing future projects and communication to farmers.

Discussion groups around the eight validation sites (focus paddocks) proved to be very effective in stimulating interest and discussion around soil moisture and crop management. The EP Innovation tour to validation sites which involved key farming systems scientists and advisers from across Australia was viewed as a very successful way of bridging the gap between farmer and research knowledge and the Nitrogen Workshop was described as ‘one of the best conversations that has ever been had about our biggest input nitrogen’.

The AIR EP newsletter was one of the key communication tools used to promote and disseminate information relating to the project. The newsletter is distributed weekly during growing seasons (less frequent at the other times) to 273 recipients (closer to 400 prior to 2022 – a change in newsletter software resulted in a drop in subscribers) and while not every issue included information relating to the Resilient EP project, a number of editions included updates and news related to the project – generally as the lead article.

As a result of feedback provided by RIG members in early 2021, a newsletter was developed specifically to provide critical updates on project progress to RIG members. Eight ‘The RIG Report’ newsletters were distributed to 42 recipients (RIG members, wider project team, focus site farmers) between October 2020 and April 2022. Topics included: information on upcoming trials; notes from recent discussion group meetings; updates on focus site activities; soil sampling progress; probe audits; and upcoming events. The newsletters appeared to be of high interest, with an average open rate of 75% (i.e. the number of recipients who read the email).

The extension officer role in the Resilient EP project helped raise awareness of the project in the region, extend results, worked with growers and advisors on how they could evaluate and implement practice changes, and facilitated discussion groups so that the key learnings could be worked through in a dynamic group format with peer-to-peer learning. The officer also provided a conduit for bringing project research and development partners together, as well as coordinating and facilitating on-ground activities when needed. The Regional Innovators Group proved highly valuable to this role through providing feedback on the levels of current grower knowledge and potential gaps, as well as how, where, and when to best engage with growers.

Effectiveness of communications at raising awareness and encouraging engagement and use of outputs

There was a general appreciation amongst interviewed stakeholders that the project's communications strategy was reasonably effective in raising awareness of the project.

Most effective for those directly involved – for example, farmers where the validation sites were and farmers in those immediate networks; and consultants involved discussing project learnings with their clients. One project team member described how the project *saw about 300 stakeholders and that has been similar each year by targeting a group in each area*. Dissemination of information to and engagement with the wider farming community was an issue raised often during the project. It was suggested that one of the issues was the project needing to generate data and results before clear messages could be communicated with confidence – *can't tell people what you don't know*.

Awareness seen to have improved as the project progressed – this was attributed by many to farmer's participation in discussion groups and field days/farm walks. It can be assumed that promotion of these engagement events through the project's communication channels was beneficial and prompted some people to attend. Word of mouth was also seen as a driver, with RIG members and advisers seen as an important part of the communication process.

Branding consistent but competing in a crowded landscape – While the branding was seen by team members as consistent, it was noted the project was operating in crowded landscape and in parallel to other similar industry initiatives, with farmers potentially unaware where certain information had come from or if they were engaged specifically by the Resilient EP project. The issue of attribution was considered to be a common issue with these types of projects.

E-newsletter a valuable communication tool – the AIR EP newsletter were seen by the project team as one of the key communication resources, with the Yield Prophet report updates *always the most clicked on item*. Demonstrating the value of using e-newsletters as an effective channel to distribute project outputs.

Regional Innovators Group

The Regional Innovators Group (RIG) was formed early in the project and consists of twelve influential farmers in the Eyre Peninsula with the goal to *engage researchers and link with the region's farmers to develop techniques to integrate information generated from the probe network, satellite imagery, climate and yield models*.

Meetings were held biannually, with six successfully run over the life of the project. RIG members also occasionally attended project management Zoom meetings and were also invited to attend the project's final workshop held at the end of March 2023. RIG Meeting participants provided feedback at the end of each meeting – a summary of this feedback is included in the table below.

Meetings were an effective method of keeping RIG members updated – Early on the meetings were highly rated in terms helping RIG members understand the project and the role of the RIG, and as the project progressed, they remained highly useful in terms of continuing to update participants on the project.

Feedback from meetings used to improve future meetings – Suggestions provided by RIG members on how meetings or communications with them could be improved were taken on board by project management and resulted in a number of successful improvements, including: the RIG report emails to keep members better informed between meetings; changes to the meeting format to include field trips and reduce the amount of time sitting in a room listening to presentations; and more time for discussion allocated after presentations.

High confidence project will meet objectives – At the March and October 2022 meetings, there was overall high confidence from participants that the project was on track to achieve its planned objectives.

The Regional Innovators Group (RIG) was regarded by all stakeholders interviewed as an essential part of the project, with the success of the project largely attributed to the collaboration between the RIG and researchers.



Regional Innovations Group workshop two at the Yeelanna Focus Field site, September 2020

Overall, the RIG was described as highly active, engaging, and a valuable part of the project and was seen to have provided practical input and direction, helped shape the project, and facilitated interaction between farmers and researchers. RIG member feedback was seen as essential in ensuring research was relevant and useful to farmers in the Eyre Peninsula and allowed for interaction between farmers and researchers at a level that *had never been seen before*, resulting in meaningful outputs with practical applications.



Regional Innovations Group workshop three at the Minnipa Focus Field site, September 2021

RIG members being local farmers themselves was seen as particularly important, as it ensured project outputs remained focused on regionally important issues and relevant to other local farmers. RIG meeting attendees consistently rated the RIG (and the RIG meetings) as being highly effective in supporting the project and providing input into its activities and direction.

Summary of RIG meeting participant feedback

#	RIG Meeting	Participant Feedback Summary
6	October 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 15 respondents • Workshop highly useful in terms of updating participants on the project (8.1 avg.). • High confidence the project is on track to achieve its planned objectives (8.0 avg.). • RIG seen to be highly effective in supporting the project and providing input into its activities and direction (8.4 avg.) – <i>the RIG has given the project direction and kept it meaningful.</i> • Comments described the great discussion session indoors on the value of the project work and the good wrap up session at the end with everyone having a chance to speak.
5	March 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 17 respondents • Workshop highly useful in terms of providing an opportunity to provide input into the project activities and direction (8.5 avg.) – <i>great discussions and planning for the final year of the project.</i> • Extra discussion time allocated after sessions highly valued (8.8 avg.) and described as <i>absolutely key to the success of the meeting.</i> • High confidence the project will achieve its planned objectives (7.8 avg.)
4	September 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18 responses • Workshop highly useful in terms of providing an opportunity to provide input into the project activities and direction (7.7 avg.) – <i>a lot of opportunities to interact. Very well facilitated discussions.</i> • High level of clarity around the role of the RIG and its role going forward (7.4 avg.)
3	March 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 20 responses • Workshop fairly useful in terms of providing an opportunity to provide input into the project activities and direction (7.0 avg.) – <i>a lot of time was spent going round in circles; appreciated the chance I got to better understand the project as well as giving input.</i> • Workshop felt to have too many presentations and despite some frustrations with the format and loss of direction, participants indicated that positive outcomes were achieved by the end. • Project seen to have a moderate level of value to growers in the Eyre Peninsula (6.1 avg.) – <i>only likely to be useful for a small number but will maybe get more onboard if they see a benefit. Majority never will go past much more than a passing interest.</i>
2	September 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 17 responses • Workshop highly useful in terms of updating participants on the project (8.2 avg.) – <i>would have been a 10, but we ran out of time to cover everything.</i> • Moderate level of clarity on what's happening (6.7 avg.) – <i>Needed time in the meeting for a summary of the days conclusions/actions/key messages.</i> • There was some concern whether the expectations of what the data can deliver are realistic and achievable – the complexity of the project was noted.
1	March 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 22 responses • Highly useful in terms of understanding the project and the role of the RIG (7.7 avg.) – <i>great participation by all involved and some great outcomes for moving forward.</i> • Respondents quite clear on what happens next (7.0 avg.) – <i>vaguely clear - But I can see a rough guide that will be honed in over time.</i> • Participants were excited to be a part of the project and were enthusiastic about its goals – <i>very impressed with the collegiate atmosphere and the strong desire to do good things to improve outcomes; fantastic opportunity that will be great to see delivered.</i>

Discussion groups

Discussion groups involving RIG members and local farmers were held at the validation sites (focus paddocks), using the core data developed by each of the sites as the basis for discussion. The peer-to-peer learning that occurred through the discussion groups helped drive practice change at a local level through a creating a deep understanding of complex decisions.

The discussion groups gave the opportunity for neighbouring growers and their advisors to come together to discuss how the measurement of soil moisture, a good understanding of soil characteristics and environmental conditions can affect their production and risk profile and how they can use that information to become more resilient and more profitable. Each group involved between 10 to 15 local farmers and advisers. The value of peer-to-peer learning when discussing potentially complex decisions was evident through the number of growers returning for each meeting and the size of the groups growing over the life of the project. The focus paddock hosts were leading, well respected growers in the area which also assisted in the group's dynamics. Group meetings were held twice a year in 2021 and 2022, once in April prior to seeding and the other in June or July. Having groups situated in the paddock in winter gained greater interest and had growers interacting and contributing to discussion.

Through the discussion groups, growers learnt to use soil moisture probes data to help predict yield potential and adjusted inputs accordingly. Four out of the eight focus paddock farmer hosts have begun to use variable rate application of nitrogen. A majority of agronomists in the Regional Innovators Group now use soil moisture probes as an indicator of yield potential when predicting fertiliser input requirements prior to and throughout the growing season.

Stakeholders interviewed made the following observations:

- Validation sites were well chosen, providing a spread of farms across the region and were critical to the project's approach. They were useful in *testing project thinking* and providing measurements and background information on real-world situations.
- Successfully provided a focus for discussion groups, resulting in productive communication and engagement between growers, researchers, and consultants – participants described the sites as inspiring and valuable for knowledge sharing.
- Discussion groups facilitated knowledge sharing and the opportunities for ongoing in-depth discussions provided researchers valuable insights into how growers adapt to new technologies and practices.
- Access to soil moisture data was a key output from the validation sites, with the sites seen to have contributed to improved farmer understanding about soil moisture holding capacity – and as a result improved confidence and decision making particularly around nitrogen application.
- Validation site discussion groups and other activities (field days/farm walks) were described as helping *sync* knowledge and understanding across the region and it was felt the project had contributed to increased interest in using soil probes.
- Some stakeholders were uncertain how much of the project information growers and advisers had taken on board, but the sense was that people were at least asking more questions around the issues.



Discussion group at Cockaleechee, July 2021 (LHS) & Cootra focus paddock site (Oct 2021).

Awareness raising

To create wider grower engagement, listen to grower and advisor feedback that could be incorporated into the project, the extension officer spent time raising awareness of the project through attending and speaking at grower field days, workshops and seminars. Events supported included:

- In 2020, 290 growers were presented to at seven agricultural bureau “sticky beak” day.
- In 2021, 115 growers were presented to across eight pre seeding trial report meetings on the upper Eyre Peninsula.
- In 2021, 410 growers and consultants were presented to at ten agricultural bureau “sticky beak” days.
- In 2022, 100 growers were presented to across eight pre seeding trial report meetings on the upper Eyre Peninsula.

Other extension activities

A range of extension and engagement activities were undertaken during the project including a regional influencers information session in December of the first year of the project, an Innovation Tour in August 2022, N mineralisation virtual workshops in November and August 2022, a Nitrogen Workshop in July 2022, and a final project workshop in March 2023. The six Regional Innovator Group meetings were key extension events held over the course of the project.

Resilient EP Information Session (December 2020): Key influencers in agriculture and regional development on Eyre Peninsula participated in an information session about the Resilient EP project including what are we trying to do, how are we doing it, and what does it mean for our farmers and our region. Feedback included that it was *very helpful in presenting the project on the flow of information, from broad to more specifics, from a range of talkers. It was relatively succinct, and everyone seemed interested. The project will give growers immediate access to information that they have previously gone on by gut feel or intuition.*

EP Innovation Tour (August 2022): The tour involved key farming systems scientists and advisers from across Australia visiting six of the eight validation sites. RIG members also participated in components of the tour including the end of tour workshop in Kimba. The tour was focused around the question: *What are the RD&E gaps/opportunities to increase productivity/ profitability/ sustainability of broadacre rainfed farming systems on EP?* The tour addressed the broader issue of the remoteness of the region and the difficulty in attracting leading scientific minds to the region to review and recommend on future RD&E needs that will grow the prosperity and sustainability of agriculture in the region.

Participants found the discussions between researchers, farmers, and advisers, particularly useful. This type of networking and interaction was a highlight of the tour for many, particularly in terms of *closing the loop between scientific research and real-world needs, raising researcher awareness of farmer issues, and drilling down on what determines farming systems decisions.*

Participants in the tour rated the value of the EP Project very highly (average of 8.6/10) in terms of helping farmers make efficient use of soil moisture. The tour itself was rated highly in terms of identifying the RD&E gaps/opportunities to increase productivity/ profitability/ sustainability of broadacre rainfed farming systems on EP (8.3 avg.). Comments highlighted that the project is *generating great thinking and analysis of water use and has clearly stimulated a lot of deep thinking and effort around soils and WUE.* It was suggested though that the project needs to run longer so changes can be implemented and measured/modelled, while challenges associated with engaging late adopters and some problems with the probes and characterisations were noted.



End of Innovation Tour workshop in Kimba, August 2022.

Nitrogen workshop (July 2022): A nitrogen modelling workshop was held in early July 2022 with the aim of being an interactive discussion on current work being done to better understand nitrogen in EP farming systems. Thirty participants attended including advisers, researchers, and farmers. Overall, feedback was very positive, with comments noting it was a great session and very useful to advisers, with one participant praising the event as one of the best conversations that has ever been had about our biggest input nitrogen. Four respondents indicated they would now take actions (change their advice) as a result of attending – e.g. *as an extension officer it gives me a stronger foot to stand on when talking in depth about N mineralisation and the gap between what is measured, then added and the resulting yield.*

Climate Change on the EP (December 2021): Twenty participants attended a workshop discussing the topic *Making sense of climate change projections for upper Eyre Peninsula* which was presented by project team member Peter Hayman. The participatory workshop addressed a range of questions:

- What weather/climate changes have you seen in the last 20 years compared to pre-2000?
- What changes in weather/climate do you anticipate in the next 10 years from now?
- What have been the main changes to farming systems over the past 10 years?
- How do we adapt based on future projections?
- What is needed to make the changes that will ensure that farming on the EP is profitable over the next 20 years?

Of those that provided feedback (16), 100% improved their knowledge and understanding of climate projections for the EP as result of the event.

Final Project Workshop (March 2023): At the final project workshop, project partners presented and participated in facilitated discussions on the findings of the project. In the second half of the workshop the project team, RIG members, farmer co-operators and invited guests reflected on the project outcomes in a session led by Jeff Coutts from Coutts J&R. Thirty-four attended including RIG member project research partners, and invited farmer and researcher guests.



Participants at the final project workshop, March 2023.

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