



SMART*choice* Newsletter 2

December 2007

This newsletter is another update on the project called SMART*choice*. To refresh your memory, SMART*choice* is a Commonwealth funded National Landcare Program project developed in response to the closure of the local tobacco industry. Whilst it was initially aimed at former tobacco growers, anything that occurs under the project umbrella will be 'advertised' through newsletters and the print media and therefore available to everyone. Remember this project is not about 'finding' or 'suggesting' new crops. **Individuals must do their own homework and business plans then ultimately make their own decisions.** If you have opinions, ideas or want further information on anything discussed in this newsletter let the project staff know.



ALPINE SHIRE

You may recall that in the first SMART*choice* newsletter we mentioned a survey that is specifically targeting former tobacco growers. The process of contacting these people and distributing the survey has started. Questions have been developed to determine the interests, ideas, knowledge gaps and future intentions of the former tobacco grower group. The response rate has been good so far. The survey results will also assist in the development of a list of 'guest speakers' who we hope will come to the area to give general background information on particular crops or industries. Even if former tobacco farmers have no interest in intensive agriculture, but intend to grow lucerne, pasture or fodder crops, the SMART*choice* project has the capacity to organise the 'right people' to come and talk to a group.

Some of these guest speaker opportunities will be advertised through mailouts. Others may need to be organised at short notice. *(For example on November 20 there was an impromptu meeting organised for local farmers when a vegetable agronomist from a local Company visited the area. We could only contact those who had specifically said to us they were either interested in, or were already growing vegetables).* In order to be fair to everyone, it is important we know who is interested in what, in case we need to do a last minute ring around. **It would be useful if you could let either myself or Kerry Murphy know if you are interested in any (or all) of the following general categories and remember you do not have to be a former tobacco grower:**

1. **Vegetable** (also including greenhouse production and vegetable seed production)
2. **Fruit, Berry and Nut**
3. **Pasture and Fodder** (also including pasture seed production)
4. **Niche** (anything else from fish farming to herb production)

For more information on the content of this newsletter or to have your name put on any of the above category lists, contact Gary Baxter or Kerry Murphy on 57521800.

Regards Gary Baxter

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A Final Word on the Guest Speaker Concept

We hope readers appreciate that the SMART*choice* project is not going to lead to any quick fixes. Instead the project will help with the facilitation of information. Putting your hand up as being interested in one of the four general groups doesn't mean you need commit to do anything or that 'we' are promoting anything. We see these meetings simply as opportunities to learn. For example, you may come to a meeting on a topic or crop only to hear that establishment costs are high and markets are cyclical. You need to know these things. So again, individuals need to conduct their own studies.

Some Recent SMART*choice* Activities

Between 13 - 15 November Gary Baxter, Lachlan Campbell and three farmer members of a sub committee established to "give direction" to the SMART*choice* project travelled to Tasmania to study land uses in that part of the world. There was no specific agenda other than to look at the diversity of farm businesses in Northern Tasmania.

Visits to particular farms were facilitated by staff of Serve-Ag Pty Ltd (*Devonport based*) and Horticulture Australia Ltd (*Hobart based*). It was important to have the local contacts to ensure we could get to the right people in a short time. So from November 13 - 15 the small Myrtleford group had a series of nine meetings and farm visits. A sample of some of these visits and meetings are given over the next couple of pages. **[If anything stands out as being of particular interest to you, ring Gary Baxter].**



*The first farm visited was Bridestowe Lavender Estate at Nabowla in NE Tasmania. This farm was established in 1921 and has a type of lavender commonly known as French Dwarf Lavender (*Lavendula angustifolia*). The farm has recently changed ownership. Harvest occurs during January and normally lasts for 4 weeks. There are approximately 50 hectares of lavender under cultivation. The crop is not irrigated but relies on an annual rainfall that is normally 900mm. The farm conducts both dried flower and distillation activities in its business. It exports oil and produce from the property. There is also an on-site restaurant and product sales area. Both cater for the passing tourist trade. More information on Bridestowe can be seen at the web address www.bridestowelavender.com.au*



The second farm visited was at Ledgerwood near the town of Scottsdale. The owner (on the left in the photo above) and his family milk 630 dairy cows on a 324-hectare irrigated home farm (but also rely on additional leased property). The family has a diversified business in that they also grow potatoes and conduct agricultural contracting.

However, the key purpose of the visit was to talk to the owner in his capacity as the Chairman of the Dorset Economic Development Group

www.dorset.com.au/welcome.htm

The Dorset Group formed in 2003 in response to a number of major industry losses in the Scottsdale area. These included the closure of a dairy factory, large clay mine and a vegetable-processing factory. [The latter situation resulted in losses of in excess of 100 factory jobs as well as farmer contracts. You can probably see the similarities to the Myrtleford-tobacco scenario]. The Dorset Group aimed to promote economic opportunities in the district. Our visit wanted to determine how that process had fared.



During the second day of the trip the highly productive Forth vegetable production area of Northern Tasmania was visited. The soils in the area were deep, red kraznomens and perfectly suited to the area's intensive vegetable and bulb production. Crops were being grown on both river flats and quite steep undulating land. The photo on the left is not brilliant but is included to illustrate one of the area's obvious key advantages. Forth has four vegetable processing Companies all within a 10 kilometre radius of the township, in other words right in the vicinity of the production areas. The photo on the right is that of a mixed brassica planting.



There has been interest amongst some former tobacco growers in various forms of 'berry' production. Therefore, in order to expand our knowledge, on Day 2 we arranged a visit to a 5-hectare raspberry farm at Christmas Hills, which is situated, on the Launceston - Devonport Road. The owner also leases an additional block of raspberries to supplement his 'home' operation. The owner harvests raspberries predominantly for a fresh fruit market but also supplies the family owned on-site restaurant /coffee shop. He regards tourism as important to his business. You will note from the photo above that he has a network of moveable covers that he manipulates to protect the ripening fruit from various weather extremes. There was also an extensive system of windbreaks 'protecting' the raspberry blocks. During peak season a significant labour requirement is involved with fruit harvest. Variety selection and pruning techniques were being used to extend the harvest season.

Space is fast running out of (*in this newsletter*) to give more detail and photos on other visits and meetings made during the trip. However, visits did include a number of 'mixed' farms that were predominantly growing a range of vegetables for processing. Crops included peas, beans, onions and potatoes. These were usually large operations, often in excess of 100 hectares. Some of the farmers we met expressed concerns about their futures, fearing overseas competition. One of these 'mixed' properties was also producing ryegrass for seed production. He was doing this 40 hectares at a time under centre pivot irrigation systems.

Most of the farms we visited had significant on farm water storages. In fact, the largest dam we saw had a capacity of 1200 megalitres. Water was obviously a great asset of the area. Some farms had gone down the path of 'value adding' their on-farm produce to capture tourist markets. Some 'good' contacts were developed during the trip including one who is both a farmer (*at Forth*) and Chairman of AUSVEG. He has tentatively agreed to be one of our guest speakers in early 2008 to give a big picture overview of where vegetable production is heading both in Australia and on the world scene.

One Last Thing

Peter and Rhonda Serpell (*raspberry growers from the Kiewa Valley*) have let us know that there is an upcoming opportunity through the Australian Rubus Grower's Association to look at raspberry variety selections in the Toolangi area. This 'opportunity' is 28 December. If you are interested, you can seek further details from Gary Baxter or Kerry Murphy at TAFCO on 57521800.