

Final Report

VegNET – National Coordination and Linkage Project

Project leader:

Dr Gordon Rogers

Delivery partner:

Applied Horticultural Research

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VegNET – National Coordination and Linkage Project VG15049

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Level 7

141 Walker Street

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Telephone: (02) 8295 2300

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Summary

VegNET was developed, initially, as a three-year program to keep vegetable industry stakeholders informed about current R&D activities, results and resources; and to support the adoption of industry best practice and to bolster vegetable production in key growing areas across the country. The lifeblood of VegNET flowed from 10 regionally based extension projects, which were coordinated and supported by the National Coordination and Linkage Project.

The aim of the Coordination and Linkage Project was to make sure that the 10 regional projects had access to the best information available and to the necessary skills to communicate that information effectively to growers and their advisors in each of the regions. The coordination project also aimed to help the 10 regional teams to work in an integrated way, together with other levy funded projects, towards a common national goal of increasing knowledge, engagement and adoption of the vegetable R&D program.

Support was provided to Industry Development Officers (IDOs), with regular phone calls, email updates, branding, common templates, and professional development opportunities. Quarterly teleconferences and three annual face-to-face meetings helped IDOs remain connected, through sharing of experiences, activities and future plans. The meetings provided chances for group networking, and upskilling with new extension tools and strategies. As a result, the VegNET group developed into a cohesive team that collaborated well. Knowledge, skills and leadership of the VegNET team developed considerably over the three years.

A review of vegetable levy-funded R&D projects was undertaken, with quarterly updates provided to IDOs in a summary document, and presentations were made by research providers. The intention was to make all IDOs aware of current and recent vegetable R&D, and especially, to identify projects which had extension materials/activities and incorporate these in to regional plans. R&D projects were prioritised for extension, and four high priority projects were presented in YouTube videos and nationally coordinated webinars.

The project collated regional work plans into a national plan, outlining extension activities by topic and regional group. Opportunities for regional collaboration and linkage with R&D projects were identified. The project also worked alongside R&D providers to help them deliver outputs and extension activities through VegNET.

Development and promotion helped VegNET progress from a new, unknown program, to a recognised and trusted point of contact in each region. That was aided by development of the VegNET name, branding and YouTube videos to introduce the program. Regular features in *Vegetables Australia* also promoted the program and achievements in each region.

A common end-of-project survey was developed and run nationally, with results collated in a single report. VegNET was rated as “important” or “very important” by 88% of respondents in keeping them informed about R&D developments. Significant industry practice change was achieved, with 71% of vegetable stakeholders involved in the program making changes to practices or adopting new technologies as a result of the project, and 72% planning further changes. Nearly all respondents (96%) saw value in VegNET continuing beyond phase 1.

The overall recommendation is to continue with a program similar to the successful phase 1 program. However, there is a need to more closely align regional contracts so that work plans can be made consistent nationally. This will allow for closer collaboration between regional groups and for them to work on common extension themes, while leaving room for adaptation to local issues or crises that arise.

Keywords

Vegetable extension, regional, VegNET, R&D

Introduction

Extension has long been a key driver of adoption of R&D information in the Australian vegetable industry. However, in recent years, extension services traditionally run by the state Departments of Agriculture have been cut significantly. The gap has been filled to some extent by Industry Development Officers (IDOs) and regional grower organisations, but dwindling resources have meant that these services have also been reduced over time.

Despite the changes in extension services, research continued to produce a large volume of outputs. A broad search of the InfoVeg database of R&D outputs identified 1450 separate reports that relate to the vegetable industry in Australia. Much of the valuable information in those projects languished in final reports and in other publications and had not effectively reached Australian vegetable growers.

The need for vegetable R&D extension services in Australia was identified and addressed by the Vegetable Industry Strategic Investment Plan (SIP) 2012-2017. Targets included increasing the end-user satisfaction of each R&D project; increasing the percentage of levy funded projects that have grower end user participation; and to facilitate the development of the vegetable industry at the regional level. Therefore, Hort Innovation sought the establishment of 10 regional projects to deliver capacity-building in vegetable-growing regions of Australia.

Geographic separation of the 10 regional groups meant there was a need for coordination under one program. Linkages between the groups were also required to help maximise efficiencies of such a program. Moreover, prioritisation of the large volume of R&D information was required.

The aim of this linkage and coordination project was to make sure that the 10 regional capacity projects had access to the best information available and the necessary skills to communicate that information effectively to growers and their advisors in each of the regions. The coordination project also aimed to help the 10 regional teams work in an integrated way towards a common national goal of increasing knowledge, engagement and adoption of the vegetable R&D program.

Methodology

Support to regional projects

A key part of the coordination and linkage project was providing support to the 10 regional groups (Table 1), particularly in the first year during the establishment of the program and when there was a turnover of IDOs during the project.

Table 1. VegNET regional delivery partners

Region	Organisation
Bowen, Gumlu & Far-North Queensland	Bowen Gumlu Growers Association
Wide Bay Burnett	Bundaberg Fruit and Vegetable Growers
Lockyer Valley	Lockyer Valley Growers
New South Wales	Greater Sydney Local Land Services
Western Australia	Vegetables WA
Northern Territory	Northern Territory Farmers Association
South Australia	AUSVEG SA
Tasmania	RMCG
Victoria – Gippsland	Food & Fibre Gippsland
Victoria – Northern, Western and South Eastern	RMCG

Regular contact between the coordinators and the regional team members, mostly through fortnightly to quarterly phone calls (depending on the needs of each IDO), ensured support was always there for planning and delivery, resolving issues, being a sounding board for ideas and general encouragement when required. Although not part of the coordination project contract, visits were made by the coordinators to IDOs in most regions throughout the course of the project.

Monthly newsletters were provided to IDOs to keep them up-to-date with developments and new resources from on-going vegetable R&D projects, useful extension tools or information from other industries, and opportunities for professional development and coordination of activities such as workshop road shows.

VegNET branding and templates were developed early on in the project with input from the IDOs, Hort Innovation and the program reference group (PRG). These included the program name “VegNET”, the national and regional logos and VegNET–branded templates for PowerPoint presentations, banners, email signatures and factsheets.

A **Skills matrix** was developed to support IDOs in finding a go-to person in a particular technical area within the VegNET team.

Opportunities for further support and **professional development** outside of the VegNET program were promoted to the IDOs. This included the APEN (Australasia Pacific Extension Network) mentor program, in which IDOs had the opportunity to be partnered with an extension practitioner outside of their existing support network.

Facilitate meetings between the regional projects

Quarterly teleconference meetings (2 hours) were held between all program members, including the coordinating team, IDOs and Hort Innovation program manager. R&D project providers also joined the meetings to provide updates on their project activities and outputs.

The meetings were held using Zoom video-conference software, and used primarily to keep IDOs connected through sharing of experiences, activities and future plans. Group activities such as surveys, other coordinated activities and promotion of the VegNET program were also discussed. The meetings were an opportunity to go over group issues or to exchange feedback with the Hort Innovation program manager and members of the coordination team. Some meetings also featured a brief presentation from IDOs on highlights from professional development opportunities, or workshops/conferences they had recently attended. R&D updates were also presented by project providers.

The **annual face-to-face meetings** were a critical and very successful part of the program where the coordination project organised a 2–3 day meeting in various locations around Australia. These provided opportunities for the IDOs to network and form a cohesive and supportive group. Where possible, sessions were run by the IDOs and included:

- Sharing experiences with one another
- Discussing solutions to common issues the IDOs were facing
- Updates from R&D projects
- Upskilling the IDOs with new extension tools and strategies presented by guest speakers
- Evaluating the VegNET program
- Planning ahead with a coordinated work plan
- Visits to local vegetable growing operations

Each meeting included a networking dinner with the IDOs, and in the final year, a networking dinner was held with local growers and advisors, where IDOs were able to exchange ideas with stakeholders from a different region.



The VegNET program team at the second annual meeting in Townsville

Two **quarterly face-to-face meetings** were held at the Hort Connections national industry convention. This was an opportunity for the IDOs to catch up, share news and views, and stay connected.

Brokering R&D information

A **review of vegetable R&D** (Appendix 3) was undertaken at the start of the project, covering relevant vegetable levy-funded projects since 2006. The intention, generally, was to make all IDOs aware of current and recent vegetable R&D and in particular, to identify projects which had extension materials or components that could feed into regional extension activities.

The review included a short summary of each project, links to the project's final report and extension materials, as well as providing a contact person from the project. The review was updated with new projects and outputs quarterly, and in the final update covered 306 projects.

R&D projects/topics were prioritised for extension, based on consultation with the PRG and IDOs assessment of local needs. These priority areas were developed into YouTube videos, and nationally coordinated webinars, and included:

- Spray application
- IPM
- Biosecurity
- Robotics

Other priority areas identified were incorporated into the coordinated work plans for each region. They included:

- Precision agriculture
- Business management
- Postharvest
- Export
- Value adding and processing
- Soil-borne disease
- Energy use on-farm
- Irrigation
- Protected cropping

Four **YouTube extension videos** were developed in the first year of the project to encourage grower interest in finding out more about new developments in four high priority areas. Where possible, research providers, growers and consultants featured in the videos. The videos were:

1. Spray technology for vegetable growers: A guide to getting it right
2. Integrated Pest Management of vegetable pests: A more sustainable approach
3. The Australian vegetable industry invests in robotics
4. Cucumber Green Mottle Mosaic Virus: Biosecurity lessons from the Northern Territory, Australia

Further brokering of R&D information to regional groups was provided through R&D provider presentations at VegNET meetings, project updates provided in monthly newsletters, and distribution of extension materials such as guides, handbooks, posters and USB sticks.

Program Reference Group

A program reference group (PRG) was formed at the start of the project, with meetings held biannually. The group included two vegetable growers, one coordination project member, the Hort Innovation program manager, and the AUSVEG communications manager. The group provided input to the program branding; prioritisation of R&D projects; and general program feedback for the coordinators and IDOs to consider.

Coordination

National extension coordination was provided by identifying opportunities for collaboration between regional groups, coordinating extension activities between VegNET groups and on-going R&D projects, and coordinating other VegNET group activities, such as end of project surveys.

A **national VegNET webinar series** was developed in response to a regional series that was planned by Vic – N, W & SE. The coordinating project identified topics suitable to a national audience, and assisted in the planning and rollout of four webinars which all regional groups promoted. Each webinar featured a research provider, consultant or extension practitioner and grower.

A **six-monthly coordination work plan** was developed as an outline of all planned VegNET extension activities by topic and regional group. The document provided the IDOs with an overview of what other groups were working on, and opportunities to develop an extension program together, use the same resources, or shared workshop speakers. Furthermore, using the list of prioritised extension topics and what had already been undertaken in each region, the coordination team was able to provide each group with a list of suggested activities/topics to add to their work plans.

Coordination with on-going R&D project providers was supplied by the coordination project. R&D projects (particularly those with extension components) were contacted by the coordination team to help align extension activities with the regional VegNET groups. Similarly, VegNET groups were provided with regular updates on extension opportunities from these projects. Joint project activities, demonstration site setup, extension road shows or linkages to growers were developed with the following extension-focused projects: export coordination, vegetable business benchmarking, cover crops, EnviroVeg, postharvest extension, VegPRO, HARPS, consumer alignment, Soil Wealth/Integrated Crop Protection, precision agriculture, biosecurity, weed management, soil-borne disease management, and agrichemical pest management needs.

Strong linkages were made with the VegPRO project in particular, with the coordination project assisting in coordination of training nationally, as well as providing VegPRO with new training suggestions.

Coordination with the national communications project continued throughout the project, with VegNET events promoted in the AUSVEG weekly update, and a regular feature in the Vegetables Australia magazine.

A coordinated **end-of-project survey** was developed by the coordination project, with input from the VegNET team. As most of the VegNET regional groups were required to survey project stakeholders at the end of their projects, it was logical to develop a nationally consistent survey to be used across all 10 regions. The IDOs collected responses in their regions, through newsletters, events and one-on-one visits or phone calls. The coordination project then collated all 153 responses together into a single national-level report.

Development and promotion of VegNET program

An introduction to VegNET YouTube video was developed for each of the 10 regions. The videos all had a generic introduction to the VegNET program, followed by an interview with the regional IDO.

The VegNET program was promoted at conferences and major field days. That included a VegNET booth inside the AHR stand at Hort Connections, and the use of banners and branded polo shirts. Presentations were made at the APEN conference in 2017, Hort Connections 2017, and in an APEN webinar.

A VegNET page on Hort Innovation and AHR's websites provided an introduction to the program, IDO contact details and a copy of the R&D review (Appendix 3).

Regular features in Vegetables Australia magazine (Appendix 5) also helped to increase brand awareness.

Outputs

Supporting materials

VegNET branding and templates were developed at the start of the project, and updated in 2017 when Hort Innovation branding was changed. These included:

- VegNET logos – national and regional
- PowerPoint presentation template
- Email signature template
- Factsheet template
- Banner template
- Polo shirts

VegNET group meetings

The following **face-to-face meetings** were held between VegNET IDOs, the Hort Innovation program manager and coordination project staff:

- Program launch – National Horticulture Convention, Gold Coast, 17 June 2016
- Year 1 annual meeting – Hort Innovation, Sydney, 25-26 October 2016 (16 participants)
- Year 2 annual meeting – Townsville, 11-12 September 2017 (19 participants)
- Year 3 annual meeting – Devonport, 18-20 September 2018 (17 participants)
- Hort Connections, Brisbane – 20 June 2018

Videoconference meetings were held between VegNET IDOs, the Hort Innovation program manager and coordination project staff on the following dates:

- 17 August 2016
- 6 February 2017
- 3 March 2017
- 5 July 2017
- 6 March 2018
- 6 December 2018
- 2 April 2019

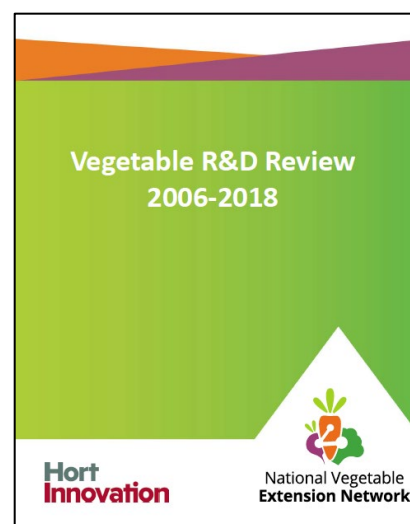
PRG meetings included:

- 18 July 2016 – by teleconference
- 20 December 2016 – by teleconference
- 16 November 2017 – by teleconference
- 18 May 2018 – by teleconference
- 18-19 June 2018 – face-to-face with the VegNET team at Hort Connections

Brokering R&D

An **R&D review document and database** was developed at the start of the project, and the following updates provided:

- October 2016
- December 2016
- January 2017



- March 2017
- September 2017
- March 2018
- July 2018
- December 2018

The review was provided to all IDOs and passed on to industry stakeholders at farm visits, workshops and conferences.

YouTube videos (3–5mins) were produced in 2017 on the following topics:

- [Spray Technology for vegetable growers: A guide to getting it right](#) (1132 views)
- [Integrated Pest Management of vegetable pests: A more sustainable approach](#) (990 views)
- [The Australian vegetable industry invests in Robotics](#) (5727 views)
- [Cucumber Green Mottle Mosaic Virus: Biosecurity lessons from the Northern Territory](#) (506 views)

Coordination

A **national VegNET webinar series** was used to explore the YouTube video topics in more detail:

- Biosecurity lessons in planning and response for the vegetable industry (22 March 2018)
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q3gc9yTrC00>
- Spray technology for vegetable growers: a guide to getting it right (24 May 2018)
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dhwO6qEM-Vs>
- Future focus: robotics and intelligent systems in Australian vegetable production systems (23 August 2018)
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YEbZohLoC5A>
- Integrated Pest Management of vegetable pests: a more sustainable approach (18 October 2018)
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xlxdpqgnjEo&t=4s>

A **coordination work-plan template** was developed for use as a consistent template for IDOs to use in their annual work plans. Regional plans were then amalgamated into a national coordination work plan.

The **end of project survey** was used for assessing project impact nationally. Responses from all regions were amalgamated into a national **end of project survey report**.

VegNET communications and promotion

Vegetables Australia articles: These were published in each issue of Vegetables Australia from September 2016 – March 2019. The articles provided updates on VegNET activities around Australia, with most issues featuring two regions.

Web pages with project details and IDO contacts were hosted on the AHR, Hort Innovation and AUSVEG websites:

- <http://ahr.com.au/news/vegnet/>
- <https://ausveg.com.au/resources/development-extension/vegnet/>
- <https://www.horticulture.com.au/growers/help-your-business-grow/research-reports-publications-fact-sheets-and-more/vegnet/>

Introduction to VegNET YouTube videos were developed in 2017. Ten separate videos were developed, each with a [generic introduction to VegNET](#), followed by an interview with the region's IDO. Regional videos are available on

the [AHR YouTube Channel](#).

Presentations about the VegNET program were made at:

- Hort Connections, Adelaide – 15–17 May 2017
- Hort Innovation staff forum, Sydney – 31 August 2017
- APEN webinar – 19 June 2017
- APEN conference – 13 September 2017

Outcomes

Network and linkages facilitated within the program

The coordination project helped the 10 regional projects avoid duplication, accelerate adoption of lessons learnt and share extension strategies, resources and plans.

The VegNET team developed from a series of 10 individual projects into a cohesive and collaborative group. This progress was particularly evident at annual meetings, where the team worked together more constructively and without competitiveness that was evident earlier in the program. Surveys undertaken at each annual meeting support this, with IDOs rating the “usefulness of the annual meeting for networking and meeting other groups” as 9.5, 9.1, and 9.5 out of 10, for years 1, 2 and 3 respectively. The cohesiveness was then maintained from the face-to-face meetings, and IDOs were more at ease to pick up the phone and work together.

IDO capacity building

The knowledge, skills and leadership of the VegNET team developed considerably over the three years. Sessions at meetings on extension methods, media strategies, using webinar technology, stakeholder segmentation and monitoring and evaluation have all contributed to IDO development. Leadership and confidence within the team also increased as a result of the opportunity to run sessions at meetings and participate in other opportunities such as the APEN conference and mentoring program.

VegNET remained relevant to the vegetable industry

The VegNET program remained focused and targeted at industry needs. This was partly the result of PRG feedback provided to the coordination project, which was then passed on to IDOs. At the end of the project survey, 73% of respondents rated the usefulness of the VegNET activities in which they participated as 8 out of 10, or higher (1= no use, 10 = very useful).

Increased reach of vegetable R&D program

VegNET IDOs were kept up-to-date with vegetable R&D and R&D providers were linked with VegNET, assisting in extension of their work. This increased the quality, efficiency and reach of vegetable extension in Australia. For example, R&D providers were regularly asked to present at VegNET meetings, helping to keep IDOs up to date with new R&D projects, as well as assist the R&D provider to better connect with and extend outcomes through VegNET.

Meeting feedback surveys demonstrated that the review of R&D projects was consistently regarded as a highly useful document and something that IDOs used in their extension work. As a result, valuable extension resources from R&D projects have now been distributed to industry instead of remaining hidden in final reports.

VegNET increased grower interest, awareness and participation in R&D. For example, after distributing the robotics video, a Victorian vegetable grower made contact to ask how they can get involved in the robotics projects, including field trials on their farm. The videos have also been a useful tool to help promote the webinar series, as the webinars follow the topics of the four videos.

At the end of project survey, VegNET was rated as important or very important by 88% of respondents in keeping them informed about R&D developments.

Industry practice change

The end-of-project survey asked growers and advisors whether they had made or planned to make changes to

their practices or adopted any new technologies. On average, 71% of respondents said they had changed practices or adopted new technologies over the past three years as a result of the project. Similarly, 72% of respondents said they planned further changes to their practices or in the advice they provide. Most of these changes were in the areas of IPM/pest management, biosecurity, industry engagement, irrigation, fertiliser use and cover crops.

Monitoring and evaluation

Midterm review recommendations

The strategic review of the Australian vegetable industry's extension and training programs (VG17006) was positive about VegNET, stating that the "VegNET model can be a very powerful platform for driving the adoption of levy-funded outcomes within the Australian vegetable industry, and building upon the success of the current program is vital." A VegNET specific mid-term review (VG15050: Regional capacity building to grow vegetable businesses – training and evaluation) examined each project separately. This review also recommended that the VegNET program continue, with some minor adjustments. The general recommendations from that review relating to the coordination project were, essentially, to provide stronger national leadership, focus on group activities and common themes, increase support to IDOs, encourage sharing of lessons and skills between IDOs, and develop a common portal to store resources.

Support to IDOs

Time and effort initially went in to establishing the program, developing a network and providing IDOs with links to R&D. However, this was also the time when IDOs needed high levels of support, which far outweighed the level the coordination project was contracted to provide. The mid-term review identified a need for further one-on-one support to IDOs, including regional visits. Regional visits were originally proposed by the coordination project but funds were unavailable. Nonetheless, in response to this feedback from the mid-term review, additional support was provided to IDOs, particularly where there was staff turnover. For example, additional support was sought from the APEN mentor program, which the coordination team recommended to the IDOs.

Coordination

The regional projects all had different work plans and priorities set in their contracts, which meant that coordination of such a group of projects was likely to be challenging from the start. Furthermore, the coordination project was established at the same time as the regional projects, so did not have input into the contracts for the regional projects. This was identified in the mid-term review and addressed by the coordination team. In response, a national coordinated work plan was developed, where the coordination team reviewed regional work plans, and combined them in to one national plan. The coordinators made suggestions of topics which could be covered, and which of the groups could collaborate in planning activities, or share resources from previously held activities. This provided some benefits to national coordination, although it still did not remove the fact that regional projects had mostly different contracted activities and performance indicators.

There were valuable opportunities for national coordination, such as the end of project survey, which was developed by the coordination project with input from all regional groups. Survey responses were retrieved from all regional groups, and then analysed as one common survey.

VegNET IDO network

Sharing of lessons and skills between IDOs was identified by the mid-term review as something that could be enhanced. At the start of the project, the group was less comfortable together, and more competitive than collaborative. However, as the group spent more time together, particularly at the face-to-face meetings, there was the opportunity to encourage sharing of lessons (both successes and failures), as well as various skills among the team members. Providing the IDOs the chance to run most of the sessions at the annual meetings increased the sharing of lessons and skills between team members, and IDOs rated these sessions highly in the meeting feedback surveys.

Common portal of shared resources

One recommendation from the mid-term review was for a common portal to store extension resources and other shared resources. The coordination project made the suggestion for a website to be developed for this, however, funding was not available. Nonetheless, a vast amount of resources have been made available to IDOs in Dropbox, or provided via USB where IDOs lacked access to Dropbox.

Particularly effective aspects of the program

Annual meetings

The opportunity to get together for two days and to network, share learnt experiences, and plan was invaluable. The annual meetings were rated highly by IDOs in feedback surveys, particularly for the opportunity to learn about what each of the other regions were doing, and take on new skills and lessons from each other face-to-face.

Developing a known brand

At the start of the program, the coordination project developed a recognised brand that was linked to Hort Innovation. This was critical for establishing a program which stakeholders could identify and realise they could trust. Articles in *Vegetables Australia*, a VegNET booth and presentations at Hort Connections and other conferences or field days all contributed to this.

Brokering R&D information

The R&D review document and update presentations given by R&D project providers were considered highly effective, both by the mid-term review and IDO surveys. As a result, these activities were continued and the number of R&D project provider updates increased. IDOs mentioned in the mid-term review that if it wasn't for the coordination project undertaking this review, then each of them would have done this separately.

Recommendations

1. Modify branding

At the start of the project, the request for the name on the logo was National Vegetable Extension Network. This should be modified in the next phase of the project to VegNET, as this had become the recognised name of the program.

2. Develop national level work plan with annual themes

Work plans should be developed as a group at the start of the project, at a national level. Annual themes focusing on high priority extension areas should be the basis of those work plans. However, some room should be left for adaptation to local issues or crises that arise.

3. Increased engagement with advisors/agronomists

Encourage more engagement with advisors and agronomists as a way of increasing the wider reach of the program.

4. Setup VegNET website

Develop a website to host and share existing and new extension materials, as well as regional IDO contacts.

5. Visits to regions

Make annual visits to each region to help better identify local issues and provide a higher level of support to IDOs.

6. Induction pack and handovers for IDOs

Develop an induction pack for new IDOs covering the VegNET program, their job description, roles of industry organisations, reporting, and training in M&E, etc. Detailed handovers should also be provided where staff turnover occurs.

Refereed scientific publications

Not applicable.

Intellectual property, commercialisation and confidentiality

No project IP, project outputs, commercialisation or confidentiality issues to report.

Appendices

1. VegNET logos
2. PowerPoint, factsheet and banner templates
3. R&D review document
4. End of project survey report
5. Vegetables Australia articles