

Final Report

Development of the national onion industry extension strategy

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Project code:

VN20000

Project:

Development of the national onion industry extension strategy (VN20000)

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Summary

A key challenge for onions extension is how to effectively provide information and support in a range of topic areas, across the Nation, from a relatively low funding base of less than \$1M. With only 225 growers spread across ten or more growing regions, the opportunity for onion-specific on-the-ground extension for each issue is limited, hence needs to be effectively prioritised and targeted for maximum impact. The onions industry is a mature industry with productive operations, and experienced growers who also draw heavily on agronomists for advice. Delivery of extension services by necessity needs to take a systems approach, and include key delivery partners such as agronomists, the network capability of Onions Australia, research partners, agribusiness, and cross-industry Hort Innovation extension staff and programs. There also need to be a laser like focus on issues of primary concern to growers and their support staff/agronomists to ensure limited resources are not chewed up in excessive planning and governance.

This extension strategy proposes a revised extension system capable of handling tier 1 and 2 issues in an efficient way. Tier one issues are those deemed *Absolutely critical*, urgent, important and Onions specific. These are issues that require action based strategies, focused on changing the status quo. Our review and consultation identified that securing greater access to chemicals (crop protection) was the single largest tier 1 issue of concern to the industry. Tier 2 issues, whilst important, already have a sound knowledge base but need to be accessible through ongoing delivery channels such as electronic resources, agronomists and embedded in cross-industry programs. These were identified as issues that require ongoing attention and vigilance to ensure standards are kept and bred and butter issues which impact on industry performance are regularly engaged with.

We recommend an approach which has two primary elements. The first revolves around action groups which are focused on addressing tier 1 and tier 2 issues. The second is the resourcing of a industry role to facilitate the functioning of these groups, oversee action strategies and evaluate progress over time.

1) Establish focused Industry Action Groups

In order to make efficient progress towards addressing tier 1 and 2 problems, multidisciplinary action groups should be established consisting of technical specialists and growers which are focused on key issues within these tiers as follows:

1. Onions Industry Crop Protection action group (Tier 1 action group)
2. Onions Industry Information and knowledge group (Tier 2 action group)

Action groups will be tasked with scoping the problem domain further and developing action plans which articulate the business case for further intervention. In the case of the Crop Protection group, the key task is to work with industry specialists to review the current SARP and identify those chemicals not currently accessible which, if made available, would yield the greatest benefit to onion growers and develop a plan to make this happen.

It should be noted that the focus on crop protection will by default bring about a focus on productivity and agronomy capability. One of the few productivity opportunities available to growers is to better manage yield constraints through more effective crop protection strategies. As new chemicals are identified and come on-line, communication of its use is required, as is upskilling to understand the systems implications of this.

2) Resourcing the capability to facilitate action plan development via action groups

This element of the strategy is about making it someone's job to ensure the action groups apply rigorous process in the development of their action plans.

3) HI to allocate resources to enact plans developed by each action group

It is recommended that approximately 50% of the onion levy be *set aside* as an initial allocation to action plans which will emerge from this process. This amount is based upon historic investments in communication and extension. This should not preclude further investment in this area if a strong business case can be made. Legacy projects should be included in this amount and be viewed as a part of this 50% in the interim.

4) Bi Annual meetings of a national advisory group to sign off on planned activity

A national governance system is required to oversee this strategy, sign off on proposed business cases and action plans and review evaluation insights. The current SIAP structure could be used for this purpose.

Keywords

Onions, extension, innovation, systems.

Introduction

The Australian onion industry is a mature industry with generally stable production. It is the ninth largest vegetable crop produced in Australia by value and the second largest vegetable category exported in 2018/19. In 2018/19 258,195 tonnes of onions were produced, with a farm gate production value of \$191 million. 18% of the onion crop by volume was exported (primarily to Taiwan, Japan, Thailand and the UAE), with a further 7% being sent to processing. A volume of 4,983 tonnes of fresh onions were imported in 2018/19, however this represented only 2.5% of the total fresh market supplied volume. Approximately 5,152 hectares were planted to onions in 2017/18, with an estimated 256 growers.⁶

Each year the Onion industry invests almost \$1million in research, development, extension and marketing activities through its levy based industry fund. As a part of an ongoing focus on innovation, the Onion industry wish to identify the high priority areas for development and a pathway to enhance the capability of the industry. Therefore, a national industry extension strategy and associated workplans plans are required to identify the key areas for industry development and guide the next five years of its delivery.

The objectives and outcome of this project is to develop a national Onion industry extension strategy and associated workplans that will identify the key industry development needs in the major onion growing regions of Australia and guide the next five years of delivery.

Methodology

Development of the strategy encompasses three phases;

- (i) Discussion paper to provide initial position on industry challenges and opportunities and potential role of extension to address these, and a scan of current activity and support in the industry, as a starting point for stakeholder engagement.
- (ii) Stakeholder engagement and draft strategy aiming to develop a shared perspective from key stakeholders as to the challenges, opportunities, gaps and priorities for extension.
- (iii) Extension strategy encompassing regional analysis and prioritised action areas, with workplans to address and evaluate progress in these action areas.

A key element of this methodology was the establishment of a project reference group to review findings and provide direction around recommendations. Members of the reference group were:

Name	Descriptor
Steve or Darren Rathjen	Grower - SA
Renee Pye (Zerella Fresh)	Marketing Manager - SA
Tim Groom Wynyon Pty Ltd	Operations/advisory - Tas
Jason Denis (Sumich)	Marketing - WA
Andrew Moon, MoonRocks	QLD
John Tselekidis Mitola Group	SA

Terms of reference for the group were:

1. Review an initial discussion paper which has been developed based on current extension activity in the Onions industry,
2. Provide input into stakeholder engagement aims and objectives,
3. Review and interpret stakeholder engagement findings
4. Review and revise the final extension strategy as required.

Outputs

1. A Project logic and monitoring and evaluation plan with linkage to Hort Innovation and industry/fund KPI's (Delivered at Milestone 102)
2. Stakeholder engagement plan (Delivered at Milestone 102)
3. A Project risk register and how risks will be managed including COVID-19 (delivered - Milestone 102)
4. Project Reference Group Terms of Reference
5. National Onion Extension Strategy and associated work plans demonstrating the use of market segmentation suitable for regional delivery (attached as appendix 1).
6. A final report with a 300 to 500 word project update article or 3 to 4 minute video for dissemination through national and regional industry communication channels – this report

Outcomes

The outcome of this project will be a national Onion industry extension strategy and associated workplans that will identify the key industry development needs in the major onion growing regions of Australia and guide the next five years of delivery. The strategy has been developed with workplans contingent upon implementation of next steps of the strategy.

The strategy is attached as Appendix 1

Monitoring and evaluation

Not applicable for this project

Recommendations

The recommendations are captured in the Onions Industry Extension strategy (Appendix 1). They are summarised below:

We recommend an approach which has two primary elements. The first revolves around action groups which are focused on addressing tier 1 and tier 2 issues. The second is the resourcing of an industry role to facilitate the functioning of these groups, oversee action strategies and evaluate progress over time.

1) Establish focused Industry Action Groups

In order to make efficient progress towards addressing tier 1 and 2 problems, action groups should be established which are focused on key issues within these tiers as follows:

a. **Onions Industry Crop Protection action group (Tier 1 action group)**

Primary objectives

- i. Annually review the SARP in conjunction with HI's Regulatory Affairs-Crop protection Manager
- ii. Develop a priority list of chemicals to make available for use in the onions industry based on a cost benefit analysis which outlines a business case and an action plan for each priority chemical. This action plan would describe the benefits to industry of making the chemical available and outline the costs associated with progressing the chemical from 'P' to 'A'.
- iii. Secure the resources to progress plans for priority chemicals through an agreed upon funding stream with HI. (see point 3, Resourcing)
- iv. Identify and work to address capability gaps in Agronomy services within the industry with regards to both awareness of available chemicals and their appropriate sustainable use.

b. **Onions Industry Information and knowledge group (Tier 2 action group)**

- i. Develop and curate a system through which the Onions industry 'knowledge base' can be stored, accessed and communicated in a timely and targeted fashion
- ii. This group is responsible for enabling access to previous investments through relevant platforms
- iii. Ensure cross industry engagement to identify relevant resources outside of the Onions industry that could be applied to Onion growing, harvesting and marketing
- iv. Ensure information is embedded in, or available to, a range of delivery channels.
- v. Develop an annual plan of targeted communication which ensure communication of timely and relevant information to levy payers on priority topics. This should be integrated with current investments in industry communication.
- vi. Develop information and communication responses to unexpected events within industry (disease outbreaks etc).
- vii. Establish an evaluation system to track engagement and impact of communication efforts.

Action groups can change as priorities change however it should be noted that these two are unlikely to change over time given their primary significance to the industry. It also should be noted that the focus on crop protection will by default bring about a focus on productivity and agronomy capability. One of the few productivity opportunities available to growers is to better manage yield constraints through more effective crop protection strategies. As new chemicals are identified and come on-line, communication of its use is required, as is upskilling to understand the systems implications of this.

2) Resourcing the capability to facilitate action plan development via action groups

Key tasks that need to be resourced:

- i) Facilitate each action group and oversee the development of action plans.
- ii) Develop business case for HI investment in action plans developed through each group. This step will effectively be the justification for the release of SIP funds within both key areas to address action plans.
- iii) Work collaboratively with HI's Regulatory Affairs-Crop protection Manager to enable growers and

agronomists to apply for Minor Use Permits as necessary.

- iv) Oversee the evaluation of all activities and ensure data collection and feedback loops are operational.
- v) Forge cross industry linkages to enable leverage of resources over time.

3) HI to allocate resources to enact plans developed by each action group

It is recommended that approximately 50% of the onion levy be set aside as an initial allocation to action plans which will emerge from this process. This amount is based upon historic investments in communication and extension. This should not preclude further investment in this area if a strong business case can be made. Legacy projects should be included in this amount and be viewed as a part of this 50% in the interim.

4) Bi Annual meetings of a national advisory group to sign off on planned activity

A national governance system is required to oversee this strategy, sign off on proposed business cases and action plans and review evaluation insights. The current SIAP structure could be used for this purpose.

Refereed scientific publications

N/A

Intellectual property, commercialisation and confidentiality

N/A

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Onions Extension Strategy