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New project tackles regional paddock-to-plate challenge

Regional farmers could secure sales to city customers with a new program launched by Regional Development Australia (RDA) Central West and funded by the Australian Government.

The collaborative business model called Central West Fresh was developed following the Small Agricultural Enterprise Logistics workshop facilitated by RDA Central West which investigated the problems small farmers and food processors face delivering produce to metropolitan clients.

The Central West Fresh project has received \$130,000 in funding from the national Farm Co-operatives and Collaboration pilot program, known as Farming Together.

Julia Andrews, RDA Central West Executive Officer, said the initiative was a response to one of the key findings from the 2016 *Value Adding to Agriculture in Central West NSW* report that found connectivity to market was a key challenge. The subsequent report, *Small Agricultural Enterprise Logistics – Getting from Paddock to Plate*, was funded by the NSW Department of Industry and is now available at <http://www.rdacentralwest.org.au/initiatives/agricultural-sme-logistics/>.

Ms Andrews explained: “Most regional agrifood businesses employ fewer than 20 people and have an annual revenue of less than \$2 million. In doing this project, we discovered the freight and logistics issue for these enterprises was an even greater barrier to growth than we realised. Some micro-businesses said they had decided not to grow bigger because they couldn’t resolve their freight/logistics issues.

“A total of 83% of respondents to a survey we conducted said they transported their produce in their own vehicles and one producer estimated he spent around 20 hours/week co-ordinating and delivering his product to and from abattoirs and delivering to customers.”

After identifying the issue, RDA Central West co-ordinated a workshop for local producers, buyers and regional freight operators to understand the issues and barriers and consider possible synergies, collaborations and solutions.

“At the workshop, it became clear that economies of scale meant regional freight operators could not provide a solution for irregular, low volumes of time-sensitive agricultural produce and that other options would need to be explored,” Ms Andrews said.

Among the guest speakers at the workshop was Lorraine Gordon, program director of ***Farming Together***, which encourages collaboration to return more farmgate value to rural producers.

Three producers who attended the workshop, Tim Salmon from Down to Earth Produce in Oberon, Rodger Shannon from Carbeen Pastured Produce in Manildra and Central West horticulturalist Greg Kocander, chose to explore a collaborative solution and secured the grant.

“All of our businesses identified that our biggest demographic for marketing our produce was in Sydney,” said Mr Shannon. “We all had tried and/or were supplying into this market, but were struggling getting our produce there. We all identified that we needed a cost-effective and time-sensitive way of getting our produce to our customers.”

The Farm Co-operative and Collaboration Program is a two-year, \$13.8m initiative from the Australian Government designed to help agricultural groups value-add, secure premium pricing, scale-up production, attract capital investment, earn new markets or secure lower input costs.

Program director Lorraine Gordon said: “Central West Fresh is a good example of the way the Farm Co-operative and Collaboration Program supports agriculture from the grower upwards. The program is farmer-driven and has attracted unprecedented levels of engagement. In only 11 months we have had interaction with 16,000 farmers, fishers and foresters across the country and across many commodity groups.”

The Farm Co-operative and Collaboration Program is being delivered by Southern Cross University on behalf of the Australian Government. It comprises a highly experienced senior team drawn from a wide range of commodity groups from across Australia and is backed by an industry advisory group representing experts from Western Australia, Northern Territory, Queensland, Victoria, South Australia and NSW. More? www.farmingtogether.com.au

“It’s great to see such a tangible outcome for our regional businesses,” said Ms Andrews. “By working with ***Farming Together*** we have been able to incubate and nurture a concept developed and driven by farmers that will increase farm gate returns in the long term.”

BREAKOUT BOX

The Central West Fresh model will:

- Work collaboratively to provide cost-effective and timely transport of time- and temperature-sensitive produce from the farm gate to the end user (meat, eggs and vegetables, expanding to other fresh produce in the future)
- Establish a streamlined freight service that reduces the handling of sensitive produce and reducing risk of contamination and spoiling
- Ensure continued control over quality from farm gate to consumer
- Establish, maintain and leverage existing relationships with food service businesses to build rapport and increase the profile of individual and combined brands
- Maintain the direct link between farm and consumer while easing the time burden of maintaining numerous customer relationships on individual producers
- Facilitate development of regional communities and businesses through increased business and employment opportunities arising from expansion of Central West Fresh.

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Media contact: Julia Andrews, Executive Officer, RDA Central West at julia@rdacentralwest.org.au or on 0448288698