

Report for 2014 WildFlowers Australia AGM

Capacity Building and Communications Enhancement of the Wildflower industry RIRDC PRJ-006760

Prepared by Bettina Gollnow, Communications & Extension Manager, WildFlowers Australia.

In the final year of the project, the following activities were undertaken to support the project goals. In addition, an annual report and a draft final project report were lodged with RIRDC.

Goal 1. Develop and communicate R, D & E information: add content to expand on and communicate R&D information and success through WFA website, weekly email briefs and monthly newsletters.

WFA Website content has been updated regularly as required, especially updating the floristry competition and What's New sections.

The directory of R&D projects was extensively updated in April 2014, and published on the website.

Weekly update emails and a monthly newsletter were produced until June 2014.

Reports on current and newly completed R&D projects were written for the WFA newsletter and *Australian Flower Industry* magazine. Some have been time consuming, e.g. summarising the completed project reports for the Farm Plus and *Leptospermum* breeding projects. 8 articles on wildflower topics have been published in *AFI* during the past year.

Goal 2. Develop skills and knowledge.

The 2013 National Student Floristry Competition was completed in October 2013 and celebrated the centenary of Canberra with 99 entries. The 2014 competition is underway, addressing the theme of 'Happy Birthday!'. Over 90 students from 8 colleges in 3 states and the ACT have entered so far. More sponsors came on board in 2014 and their generosity will increase the opportunities for the winners. This activity addresses the goal of educating the floral supply chain and is co-managed with floristry teacher Helen Tremain.

The 9th Australian Wildflower Conference, a 1 day national industry conference was held on June 21, immediately following the national flower conference (Commference) organised by FAQI. Proceedings were prepared for the delegates. Given that there has been no national conference for 4 years, the numbers attending were disappointing with a total of 41 people booked in, including the 12 speakers. The viability of future national conferences is in doubt after this result, as at least 60 paying registrations needed to cover the costs.

A very successful evening floristry demonstration was held in conjunction with Padstow TAFE on August 26. Demonstrators David Berger and Bernie Gadd, who each have a strong following, provided huge inspiration for the 65 attendees, using top quality Australian wildflower and foliage products sourced through

East Coast Wildflowers and Premium Greens Australia. Attendees expressed strong interest in more demonstrations, a workshop and also farm tours, as well as receiving information on wildflowers via an email newsletter.

Copies of the booklet 'Flowers from Australia' were more widely disseminated this year, and included in delegate packs at the FAQI Commference, the 9th Australian Wildflower Conference and the wildflower floristry demonstration.

RIRDC launched a new information portal in mid 2014. This includes snapshots of around 12 wildflower crops. Draft information was checked and photos sourced.

A WFA Facebook page was set up in 2014 (this is a recommended way to communicate with florists) – www.facebook.com/wildflowersaustralia A flower snapshot is added each month, along with industry news and events. It proved to be an important communication channel to florists to raise awareness of the floristry demonstration evening. Photos of wildflower arrangements seem to get most attention.

Goal 3. Build industry networks and information sharing and Goal 4. Facilitate R&D communication with industry groups to identify research needs.

A list of potential R&D&E projects deemed of high priority by the WFA board was developed and submitted to RIRDC. It included the key themes highlighted by the member survey conducted in mid 2013. The following projects were identified and progressed as follows – an application to fund project A was submitted to RIRDC and project C was completed as part of this project; project E is being addressed through private sector funding:

- A. Capacity Building and Communications Enhancement of the Wildflower industry Stage 2
- B. Understanding the domestic market for Australian grown wildflowers through improved industry statistics and education of the market
- C. National wildflower industry conference
- D. Supporting the research capacity in the Australian wildflower industry through a student research scholarship
- E. New product development.

Assistance was given to Agtrans Research who were commissioned by RIRDC to conduct an economic evaluation of Wildflowers and Native Plants projects completed during 2008-2013. This included surveying industry about the impact of the wildflower quality specifications and research on Ptilotus.

The strategic plan for WFA was updated again.

Assisted in planning a visit to the east coast in May/June 2014 by Kazuko Nishikawa from Austrade's Tokyo office – her one day program in Sydney included visits to the Australian Botanic Garden Mt Annan, and discussions with WFA board members and Ozbreed at Richmond.

Email enquiries received by WildFlowers Australia have been answered; those that may offer business opportunities for members are forwarded.

Goal 5. Coordinate the collection of reliable information for industry on the economic fundamentals of growing major wildflower crops in Australia.

Lodi Pameijer, completed budgets and other information for 10 major crops within the cost calculator(CC), working with leading growers. The summary chart was published in the WFA newsletter.

Additional work which complements this project:

As the principal of Flora Advisory Services, Bettina Gollnow has completed other wildflower industry projects during 2013-14. These have included:

- Promotion to industry of *'What cut flower is that – the essential care and handling guide for cut flower professionals'*, a manual for florists and other value chain members co-authored with florist and educator Del Thomas. It successfully gained accreditation within the Australian training framework to ensure it is a recognised resource for floristry training. A high number of downloads and sales of printed copies via the RIRDC website have been achieved. This publication was sponsored by WFA and FAQI.
- Planning for the 2015 International Protea Association Conference and New Ornamental Crops Symposium to be held in Perth in August 2015.

Project implications and future

This project is winding down, with only a floristry workshop remaining to be completed. A proposal seeking on-going funding for stage 2 was submitted to RIRDC and we are waiting for their final go-ahead (Federal budget cuts to RIRDC have resulted in all projects being reviewed, even if they were originally approved). The budget for stage 2 is significantly less than stage 1, so less can be done.

Some conclusions drawn from this project are:

Conferences, demonstrations and workshops:

Attendees at all events except the first (a floristry workshop held at Port Macquarie) were asked to complete evaluations – all returns indicated satisfaction with information presented and venues. Evaluations were also used to gather information about the industry members – experience, crops grown, farm size, target markets, future plans and concerns.

When the budget for this project was developed in 2011, half the total cash costs of the project were to be met by industry and the balance paid by RIRDC as matching funds. WFA has been responsible for paying the 'industry direct' cash amounts to RIRDC. A proportion of the industry contribution was to come from registration fees paid by participants at industry conferences, workshops and similar events. Unfortunately far fewer industry members than expected participated in these events, apart from the NSW conferences held in Campbelltown in June 2012 and the floristry demonstration held in August 2014. This meant that just over half the income expected from registrations was received and WFA had to make up the shortfall.

Industry feedback:

This was collected via evaluations and also several surveys and meetings. Some issues came up consistently and seem to be important across the industry. Some were addressed through subsequent events, e.g. topics addressed at the 9th Australian Wildflower Conference. Others were explored further as potential projects or initiatives to be undertaken by WFA (e.g. end point royalties).

Unfortunately not everyone is aware of previous projects and resources already available. This is partly due to people being relatively new industry members and/or not members of WFA or another industry association. As a result they are disconnected from communication channels.

Some industry members regularly use the WFA website for information, others rarely do. The June 2013 member survey indicated that the majority felt an up to date website was important. So there is an inconsistency: should resources be allocated to maintaining and improving the WFA website, especially as a new more up to date website is needed? Or are other media and communication strategies more important for industry members?

Key themes from conference and industry feedback gathered during the project:

- Ongoing interest in up to date technical information on production methods - nutrition, irrigation, pest and disease management, biological farming, postharvest care
- Ongoing interest in up to date information on new products/crops available
- There are keen new or recent entrants to the industry. However they are not always aware of resources available and of things that have already been done. They would welcome mentoring or access to a local network.
- A lack of awareness of how R&D gets done, how it is funded and who is responsible for funding it
- Need lobbying on behalf of industry to deal with legislative requirements - such as export permits and on-farm OH&S issues
- Difficulties of dealing with adverse environmental conditions mean individual growers struggle
- More growers are planning to expand production or replant their existing area with new crops or varieties, fewer are reducing their growing area or intending to retire from the industry
- WFA is seen as playing a key role coordinating efforts on behalf of the industry and providing networking opportunities.

Implications

The most cost effective and direct way of communicating to wildflower industry members remains emails, an electronic newsletter and the website, with events such as conferences and workshops of value for networking.

Unfortunately not everyone allocates time to regularly respond to emails or check the website, and apparently not everyone can invest the required time and funds to travel to a conference or workshop.

Developing and running a conference requires considerable time inputs, and associated costs include venue hire, catering, travel and accommodation costs (for the organiser and the speakers). Low registration numbers mean that the time and monetary costs of organising an event far exceed the registration income, and jeopardise the networking benefits for individual attendees. Few of the events organised through this project attracted sufficient participants to warrant the investment made.

With the virtually complete loss of state government extension and R&D support, the industry is now more reliant than ever before on its own members' willingness and capacity to work together to solve problems and build their industry.

An important area for industry to address involves ensuring that wildflower production is profitable. One way to achieve this is for growers to be fully aware of their costs of production and to ensure that their flowers are traded at prices greater than this cost. This project used the CC to calculate the cost of production of 10 common wildflower crops. Growers can access the cost input spreadsheets developed by the project, either adjusting the input costs to suit their enterprise, or comparing their input costs, or 'price per stem' against those of an experienced grower as entered into the spreadsheet.

The National Student Floristry Competition was well supported by and raised awareness and technical skills in using wildflower products, enhancing the learning outcomes of the Certificate III course. Managing the competition does require considerable time inputs, but sufficient sponsorship income covers this cost, and allows attractive prizes to be offered to the winners.

The floristry demonstration was also a success on many levels – it developed an email contact list of florists who are interested in wildflowers, got their feedback, taught them product names and how to use it, allowed a wide range of product to be promoted including new varieties, and reached many new-to-the industry florists who may now use more wildflower product in their work. Run as a partnership with a floristry college, there is potential for such events to be 'cost neutral'.