



Final report

Northern Breeding Business (NB2) Review - Public

Project code: B.GBP.0062

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Date published: 16 January 2023

PUBLISHED BY
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NORTH SYDNEY NSW 2059

Meat & Livestock Australia acknowledges the matching funds provided by the Australian Government to support the research and development detailed in this publication.

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Abstract

The Northern Breeding Business (NB2) program is addressing the sustainability of northern Australian beef herds through research and adoption projects that include investigating calf survival, improving business profitability and increasing the adoption of proven management practices and technology in Northern Australia beef herds. The NB2 research and adoption projects will, in the first instance, improve the long-term profitability of beef businesses by improving calf survival and breeder reproduction and by increasing the body weight of cattle sold. The pathways to practice project is an adoption model that involves producer led groups of up to 12 beef businesses that address poor adoption of known research and development outcomes for their business through peer-to-peer learning and business analysis. The Northern Beef Business program was initiated by the North Australia Beef Research Council (NABRC) and Meat and Livestock Australia (MLA). The NB2 program is in the second year of operation. The research and adoption activities during this period have been successful in meeting contractual outcomes.

To maximise impact and success of the NB2 program the North Australian Beef Research Council has considered the functioning of the NB2 program and suggested the program could have a greater impact in Northern Australia compared with the impact of the current delivered outcomes.

As such MLA sought to review the current NB2 program to ensure that future activities and program structure can deliver the intended benefits to industry.

Key recommendations

- Recognise NB2 as an umbrella program with separate component projects and decouple R&D projects from Pathways to Practice to better focus attention on desired adoption outcomes.
- In bringing focus to Pathways to Practice, reset the pilot program to account for leadership and coordination across six groups in a pilot phase.
- Improve program development processes for larger collaborative efforts using the World Bank Project Cycle (Appendix 3) as a template.
- Improve group development understanding and functions around concepts like 'Working in Groups', 'Compelling common purpose' and 'connectors'.
- Support existing groups by the appointment of a mentor/master facilitator.
- Bring greater focus to capacity building as an outcome from NB2.
- Improve the application of the Communication Plan within the project including identifying the chain of command and leadership responsibilities.
- Replace existing Management Committee with an Advisory Group focussed on group engagement and effectiveness.
- Identify and empower project champions.

Executive summary

Any reader of the foundational documents of the NB2 program could not fail to be inspired by the bold presentation of a large integrated program delivering research outcomes to 250 businesses across northern Australia. Such was the optimism from the architects of the program that they were confident to ascribe to the program reductions in herd mortalities, improvements in weaning rates and turnoff weights amounting to a \$20m net gain for the industry per year by 2027. Foundational assumptions surrounded groups of producers operating at such a high level as to be self-directed and seeking and applying/adopting key research outcomes to improve their business performance. On the research and development side of NB2, calf loss was identified as the critical key to unlock such gains and a major project was initiated to further research and develop management solutions in this area. In parallel, groups of producers were prompted to form, facilitated by freshly trained facilitators drawn from State departments or private operators throughout the target area, and embark on a benchmarking process based on a uniform data gathering template approach. Having completed said templates, it is anticipated that participating businesses will seek R&D solutions to issues that have been revealed through peer-to-peer discussions.

It must be said that much of the above has been tried before to varying degrees of success through a range of programs. It has been valuable for this review to recognise that, at its core, NB2 is an umbrella program under which key projects are funded by MLA. Under NB2 then, is an R&D component and an adoption component. Whilst the program suggests that these two aspects fit together by providing R&D solutions to producer identified issues, we see that taking some years to eventuate, leading to our suggesting decoupling the various projects for ease of focus particularly in earlier years.

Key findings

This review has concluded that irrespective of doubts about the likelihood of success of the above narrative, the notion of a pilot phase of the adoption project as outlined in the relevant project documents, provides an opportunity to objectively test the various assumptions embedded in the program architecture. In fact, this is stated specifically in the NB2 Communications Plan 2020–23 and therefore not new but needs to be reemphasised.

The lack of a formal project cycle in the establishment of the NB2 program, the perceived lack of sufficient social science underpinnings and support for the groups, the fact that templating business performance has been introduced to what is to be a producer driven approach, all serve to fuel reservations about the processes being used. Covid lockdowns have also severely hampered efforts to get groups together. Those and other issues have served to slow the progress of the project. A full assessment at the conclusion of the pilot phase will provide conclusive feedback on what's working and why.

There is little to link the research component of NB2 to the Pathways to Practice adoption component, notwithstanding the initial documents presenting NB2 as a cohesive integrated program. There are reservations in some quarters about the focus on calf loss as the definitive research issue. There is little understanding in the research team of the groups and how they operate and vice versa. A decoupling of the various components of NB2 as presented in the narrative will allow focus to be drawn to each component and an appropriate communication program to be developed between them.

Impending loss of key members of the existing Management Committee and a reset of the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries (QDAF) project provides an opportunity to find a sharper focus on the performance of existing groups during the pilot phase by the creation of an advisory group with potentially a more hands-on Master Facilitator role supporting the existing groups and

their facilitators. Given that the existing groups are covered under the pilot project means that they have opportunity to address the issues of time constraints placed on the facilitators involved and their lack of confidence and experience in leading groups through the templating processes groups are to follow. Any element of brand damage to NB2 in any group will impact the potential rollout of further groups should that be deemed appropriate, making it important that each group gets every opportunity to find its own level of success.

At this point in time there is a perception that the NB2 model is not “scalable”, although the apparent success thus far of the Indigenous Land and Sea Corporation (ILSC) and corporate groups would suggest further expansion of those groups should be supported with those leaders. Learning from the pilot phase will inform the formation of more groups. The success of any group will be at a level of their choosing.

Capacity building is yet to receive the prominence it deserves in NB2, as the means of creating a source of facilitators for any further groups. Connecting with MLA’s Livestock Consultant Internship Program is one immediate pathway to begin to address the issue, recognising that the rollout of further groups post the pilot phase, will rely heavily on non- government facilitators with sufficient credibility to form and lead groups. Groups with a connector and or compelling common purpose are likely to be more stable than those without.

Leadership, ownership and advocacy present as significant obstacles to project success at the time of writing. This report presents a wide range of fixes to issues identified by respondents and endorsed by the reviewer, finding a champion or group of champions may be the most difficult. Allowing the pilot to run its course gives time to find solutions to the challenges identified.