

Final report

Communication Coordinator for the Managing Climate Variability Program Phase 5

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Abstract

The Managing Climate Variability (MCV) Program Phase 5 is a long-term collaborative R&D program focused on providing agricultural producers with more accurate seasonal forecasting information and tools for use in their operations.

In 2017, Birchip Cropping Group (BCG) was appointed as Communications Coordinator, to oversee the communication elements associated with the MCV Program. This included working with the National Coordinator, MLA and PMC partners to increase awareness and promote the adoption of climate risk management practices on-farm. As part of this role, the Communications Coordinator managed a range of communication products and channels including:

- The monthly Climate Kelpie forecast
- The Climate Kelpie News, a quarterly eNewsletter publication containing four articles based on MCV supported activities
- The Climate Kelpie website
- @ClimateKelpie on Twitter
- Climate Kelpie's Facebook page

Climate Kelpie communication channels have delivered high levels of engagement, resulting in 55,753 views of Climate Kelpie News content, 271,120 people being exposed to the MCV project via Twitter and more than 90,000 visitors to the MCV website.

The MCV Program is funded by Meat and Livestock Australia, Grains Research and Development Corporation, AgriFutures, Sugar Research Australia, and Cotton Research and Development Corporation.

Executive summary

Background

As the Communications Coordinator for the MCV5, the Communications Coordinator oversees a range of communication products and channels, in order to increase awareness and promote the adoption of climate risk management practices on-farm.

Objectives

Eight communication objectives were developed for the project, which centred on the development and delivery of MCV branded communications to increase awareness, and promote the adoption of, climate risk management practices on-farm. Key outputs were:

- development of a communication plan (delivered August 2017)
- attendance at PCG meetings (90 per cent attendance rate as per the meeting minutes)
- management of the Climate Kelpie website (as summarised under results)
- quarterly publication of the Climate Kelpie News (as summarised under results)
- weekly engagement through Climate Kelpie’s Twitter and Facebook channels (as summarised under results)
- submission of milestone reports (all reports submitted on time and accepted).

Methodology

Over the course of the project, MCV communications channels engaged with key audiences through:

- the Climate Kelpie website (www.climatekelpie.com.au)
- a quarterly newsletter, the Climate Kelpie News
- a Climate Kelpie Twitter presence (@climatekelpie), and
- a Climate Kelpie Facebook page.

Results/key findings

- The Climate Kelpie webpage hosts a blog (Climate Kelpie News), links to tools developed under the MCV program, information on the climate champions program, regular climate updates and the BoM Climate Guides. Over the course of the project, the webpage:
 - attracted 90,432 unique visitors and 10,251 returning visitors (more than one session)
 - delivered 202,014 page views
- The Climate Kelpie News is a quarterly newsletter distributed to more than 16,000 emails through a GRDC distribution list. Thirteen editions of Climate Kelpie News were developed and distributed over the course of the project. Climate Kelpie News achieved:
 - 55,753 unique opens at a conversion rate of 26 per cent
 - 33777 click throughs to blog articles hosted on the Climate Kelpie website.
- Climate Kelpie tweeted weekly through the @ClimateKelpie twitter handle. Since its inception, @ClimateKelpie:
 - attracted 810 followers, with an annual growth in followers of 12.5 per cent
 - delivered 271120 impressions (exposure to potential viewers)
 - generated 1,764 clicks to featured and retweeted content

- secured 931 likes and 513 retweets.
- Climate Kelpie’s Facebook presence delivered 166 ‘followers’ since 1 July 2019 (earliest accessible records), including:
 - 567 daily engaged users (actively accessing content on the page)
 - A reach of 5649 (exposure to potential viewers)
 - 8291 impressions (total potential page views).

Benefits to industry

Communications through the Climate Kelpie suite of communications products have served to increase awareness of the Managing Climate Variability project and its outputs. In particular, significant interest has been generated in climate drivers and the climate champions, indicating strong farmer interest in understanding and mitigating the impacts of climate change and climate variability.

Future research and recommendations

Based on the outputs and outcomes of this project, BCG would recommend that future research/project work:

- Ensures research outputs and tools are delivered regularly throughout projects, not solely at the end - this will assist in identifying suitable and compelling content over the life of a project.
- Place a stronger emphasis on identifying and communicating farmer-driven efforts to mitigate the impacts of climate variability and climate change, not just research and research outputs.

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1. Background

Climate is the biggest individual driver of production variability in agriculture, and accounts for one-third to two-thirds of annual global crop yield variability. The Managing Climate Variability Program (MCV) is focused on providing agricultural producers with more accurate seasonal forecasting information, practical climate tools and products, as well as case studies of people who are incorporating climate risk information into their business decisions. The aim is to help primary producers and natural resource managers manage the risks, and exploit the opportunities, resulting from Australia's variable and changing climate, by:

- improving the accuracy of forecasting on timeframes of value for primary production;
- providing climate information and tools for managing climate risk; and
- increasing knowledge and confidence to adopt climate risk management.

MCV communications help to increase awareness of MCV and its outputs and promote the adoption of climate risk management practices on-farm through the Climate Kelpie website and other communication products. MCV communications are targeted at producers across the main industries represented by the project:

- livestock
- grains, pulses and oilseeds
- cotton
- dairy
- sugar

2. Objectives

The objectives of the MCV Communications project were to:

1. Work collaboratively with MLA and the National Coordinator for the MCV Program in the smooth and integrated operations of the communication activities of the MCV Program.
2. Develop an overarching communications plan for MCV, which builds on the recommendations of the MCV Communication Program Review, conducted in December 2015.
3. Further integrate communications and extension providers into the Community of Practice (CoP) established as part of the SCF project to raise awareness of MCV products and services.
4. Maintain and continuously improve the MCV legacy communications products; Climate Kelpie website, subsequent Climate Kelpie social media accounts, MCV website and CliMag newsletter.
5. Actively moderate and manage online communities to ensure end-user questions and feedback are being noted and responded to where appropriate.
6. Develop appropriate communication and consultation processes and procedures.
7. Report on communication activities and delivery against the communications plan to the MCV Management Committee, and provide data necessary for the monitoring and evaluation of MCV.
8. Provided an annual report to MLA on communications activities conducted over each financial year.

3. Methodology

Over the course of the project, MCV communications channels engaged with key audiences through: the Climate Kelpie website (www.climatekelpie.com.au); a quarterly newsletter, the Climate Kelpie News; a Climate Kelpie Twitter presence (@climatekelpie) and; a Climate Kelpie Facebook page.

- Each quarterly issue of Climate Kelpie News focused on revisiting a climate champion case study, reviewing a decision support tool, an MCV supported project (e.g. FWFA or SCF) and a miscellaneous article. PMC input was sought for article topics and consideration is given to ensure good representation across sectors and regions across editions. These articles were published to the Climate Kelpie webpage as ‘blog’ articles.
- Regular weekly engagement occurred through the Climate Kelpie Twitter and Facebook accounts, drawing attention to communications plan activities, key MCV funder resources, Rural R&D for Profit project outputs and general seasonal climate forecasting information that relates to a producer audience. In addition to planned communications, relevant tweets from project stakeholders were also shared/retweeted on a regular, ad-hoc basis.

4. Results

4.1 Objective 1

Works collaboratively with MLA and the National Coordinator for the MCV5 program in the smooth and integrated operations of the communication activities and the overall operation of the MCV5 Program

Apart from leave, illness or other professional commitments, the Communications Coordinator (or a proxy) has participated in and provided a communications update at all MCV PMC teleconferences and face-to-face meetings during the reporting period. In the case of leave, illness or other professional commitment, the Communications Coordinator has reviewed meeting minutes and undertaken follow up meetings with the National Coordinator.

The Communications Coordinator has maintained regular contact (multiple times monthly) with the National Coordinator for the MCV5 program.

4.2 Objective 2

Develop an overarching communications plan for MCV, which builds on the recommendations of the MCV Communication Program Review, conducted in December 2015 by Jeff Coutts so that it establishes strong linkages with key stakeholders and the SCF project and links where feasible to agreed monitoring and evaluation activities of MCV5.

The communication plan, approved in June 2017, was implemented throughout the project’s lifespan. The communication plan outlined the strategy and methodologies to be used for the MCV5 Program communications, information distribution, feedback and stakeholder management, and how these will be managed during the five years of the program.

The communication plan built upon previous work undertaken, or developed for the project, including:

- *Managing Climate Variability Program V - A research and development Operational Plan for 2016-17 to 2021-22*
- *MCV R&D Program Communication Review, Coutts J&R – December 2015*
- *MCV5 Operations Plan, currently being developed by the National Coordinator*

The purpose of the communication plan was to oversee the communication elements within the Operational Plan and work with the National Coordinator, MLA and PMC partners to:

- *maximise the opportunity to facilitate and support MCV5 objectives as outlined in the Operations Plan and be in position to support future plans.*
- *collaborate effectively with the MCV5 stakeholders and assist program partners in achieving the performance objectives.*
- *acknowledge and be responsive to the challenges of supporting a diverse and geographically spread stakeholder base thus ensuring a whole of program foundation.*
- *ensure project partners and key stakeholders staff are known and recognised and that direct interaction from industry is encouraged.*

The Communications Coordinator regularly met/spoke with representatives of the participating RDCs, regarding content identification and development, content curation approaches and case study identification and development. The Communications Coordinator also played an active role in the MCV PMC, proposing numerous activities, including the most recent MCV funded project investigating producer use of climate and seasonal forecasts.

4.3 Objective 3

Further integrate communications and extension providers into the Community of Practice (CoP) established as part of the SCF project to raise awareness of MCV, subsequent products and services and build a larger network by which to disseminate communications.

The Communications Coordinator maintains regular contact with the CoP facilitator (also a BCG staff member). Communications developed following presentations at CoP meetings which includes updates on the Forewarned is Forearmed project and other seasonal climate forecasting related projects and products.

Katherine Hollaway, sub-contracted by BCG to prepare Climate Kelpie News articles regularly attended CoP meetings and maintained ongoing contact with the facilitator, resulting in the publication of multiple articles sourced directly from the FWFA program.

4.4 Objective 4

Maintain and continuously improve the highly valued MCV legacy communications products, the Climate Kelpie website, subsequent Climate Kelpie social media accounts, the MCV website and the CliMag Newsletter (rebranded as Climate Kelpie News in mid-2018 with the approval of the MCV Project Management Committee).

4.4.1 Climate Kelpie webpage

The Climate Kelpie webpage acts as the focus for all Climate Kelpie communications. The webpage hosts a blog (Climate Kelpie News), links to tools developed under the MCV program, information on the climate champions program, regular climate updates and the BoM Climate Guides. Over the course of the project, the Climate Kelpie webpage:

- *attracted 90,432 unique visitors and 10,251 returning visitors (returning more than once to view updated content)*
- *delivered 202,014 page views, predominantly the Climate Kelpie Forecast and various Climate Kelpie News articles, including farmer case studies.*

4.4.2 Climate Kelpie News

Twelve quarterly editions of Climate Kelpie News (CKN) (formerly CliMag) were published over the course of MCV5, with a thirteenth issue due for publication in December 2021, following the submission of this report.

Each issue of Climate Kelpie News focused on revisiting a climate champion case study, reviewing a decision support tool, covering a component of an MCV supported project (e.g. FWFA or SCF) and a miscellaneous article. PMC input was sought for article topics and consideration was given to ensuring good representation across sectors and regions.

CKN was distributed to more than 16,000 through a GRDC distribution list, achieving (to December 2021):

- *48 published articles, a number of which were republished in other newsletters or media outlets*
- *55,753 unique opens – a conversion rate of 26 per cent*
- *33,777 click throughs to content hosted on the Climate Kelpie website (generating approximately 20 per cent of the page's traffic).*

4.4.3 Social media channels

Regular, weekly engagement occurs through the Climate Kelpie Twitter and Facebook accounts, drawing attention to communications plan activities, key MCV funder resources, Rural R&D for Profit project outputs, the Climate Guides and general seasonal climate forecasting information that relates to a producer audience. Any public comment is assessed according to the Social Media Response Process outlined in the Communications Plan.

- *Climate Kelpie tweeted weekly through the @ClimateKelpie twitter handle. Since its inception, @ClimateKelpie:*
 - *published approximately 200 tweets (not including likes or retweets)*
 - *attracted 892 followers, with an annual growth in followers of 12.5 per cent*
 - *delivered 271,120 impressions (exposure to potential viewers), an average of ~1,400 per tweet*
 - *generated 1,764 clicks to featured content, an average of ~9 per tweet*
 - *secured 931 likes and 513 retweets*

- *Climate Kelpie’s Facebook presence posted approximately 150 times, delivering 148 ‘followers’ since 1 July 2019 (earliest accessible records), including:*
 - *567 daily engaged users (actively accessing content on the page)*
 - *A reach of 5,649 (exposure to potential viewers)*
 - *8,291 impressions (total potential page views)*

4.5 Objective 5

Actively moderate and manage online communities to ensure end-user questions and feedback are being noted and responded to where appropriate.

MCV communications channels, including Twitter, Facebook and the MCV email address were actively monitored and, where necessary or advantageous to the project, responded to by BCG staff according to the principles outlined in the communications plan.

4.6 Objective 6

Develop appropriate communication and consultation processes and procedures.

Avenues for feedback and an approvals process were identified during the development of the communications plan, including:

- *an audit of key RDC communications channels was undertaken at the start, and repeated at the mid-point, of the project*
- *regular engagement was undertaken with representative RDCs through the PMC and through a program of ongoing, planned and ad-hoc meetings with RDC communication representatives*
- *regular engagement was undertaken with the BoM and its representatives.*

4.7 Objective 7

Report on communications activities and delivery against the communications plan to MCV Project Management Committee at all PMC meetings. Assist with providing the data needed to populate the monitoring and evaluation plan of the MCV5 Program.

Unless absent due to leave, illness or professional commitments, the Communications Coordinator (or a proxy) has participated in and provided a communications update at all MCV PMC teleconferences and face-to-face meetings during the reporting period. As agreed with the PMC, statistics regarding Climate Kelpie communications are provided at every second meeting, through the bi-annual Milestone Reports and in response to requests from the National Coordinator.

4.8 Objective 8

Provide an annual report to MLA on communication activities conducted over each financial year.

Ten milestone reports, including a final report, were submitted to MLA, on time and in full:

- *an initiation report*
- *four Milestone reports at the end of the 2017, 2018 and 2019 financial years*
- *four half-yearly reports at the end of the 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020 calendar years*

- *this final report, submitted in December 2021.*

5. Conclusion

The MCV communication project has achieved against all of the objectives outlined in the sub-contract and further expanded upon in the MCV Communication Plan.

Climate Kelpie communication channels have delivered high levels of engagement, resulting in 55,753 views of Climate Kelpie News content, 271,120 people being exposed to the MCV project via Twitter and more than 90,000 visitors to the MCV website.

The MCV Communications Project has demonstrated that there is an appetite for timely, relevant and high-quality climate communications among project stakeholders and producers.

5.1 Key findings

- The Climate Kelpie webpage hosts a blog (Climate Kelpie News), links to tools developed under the MCV program, information on the climate champions program, regular climate updates and the BoM Climate Guides. Over the course of the project, the webpage:
 - attracted 90,432 unique visitors and 10,251 returning visitors (more than one session)
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5.2 Benefits to industry

Communications through the Climate Kelpie suite of communications products have served to increase awareness of the Managing Climate Variability project and its outputs. In particular, significant interest has been generated in climate drivers and the climate champions, indicating strong farmer interest in understanding and mitigating the impacts of climate change and climate variability.

6. Future research and recommendations

- A content curation rather than the current content creation approach would increase the availability of potential, relevant content, and maximise the value of any communication investment in climate communications. This would however entail broadening the mandate of the communication channels beyond the MCV and FWFA projects to more general climate and climate research communications.
- Farmer case studies, particularly those relating to potential mitigations/adaptations and practical actions to respond to climate change and climate variability, were very well received. It is strongly recommended that an increased focus should be placed on case study development and farmer-to-farmer knowledge sharing for future climate communication projects.
- New, relevant, timely content (for example the climate guides, the publication of Climate Kelpie News and the publication of the monthly Climate Kelpie Forecasts) significantly increased engagement and traffic through the various communication channels. It is strongly recommended that the frequency of Climate Kelpie News, and the publication of new content to the website, be increased. A content curation, rather than creation approach, would help to facilitate this in a cost-effective manner.

7. References

Not applicable as this was not a research project.