

GrazingFutures Case Study

Grazing business owners and managers get hands-on with Microsoft Excel

Livestock producers across southwest and central Queensland have been upskilling to improve their proficiency in using Excel. Excel is one of many products in the Microsoft Office suite of programs included in a standard Microsoft Office subscription. However, despite being a standard program on the computer of almost all livestock producers, its often rarely used or not used at all. This is usually due to lack of experience or training and the capabilities of Excel are often poorly understood by the user. This combined with the lack of understanding in how to use it generally means people don't have the confidence to use this very beneficial tool.

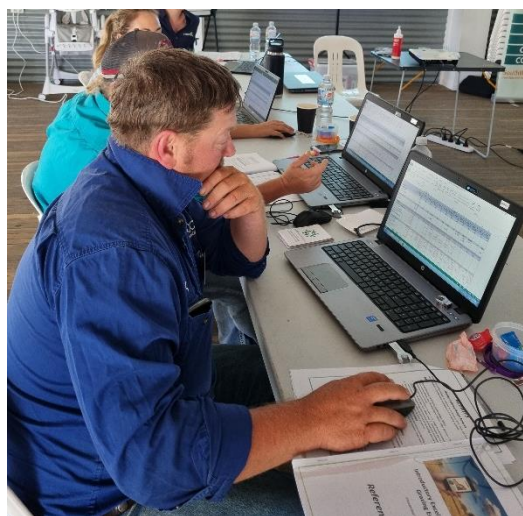
ConnectAg has been running Introductory Excel workshops for Grazing Enterprises since 2018. 'Introductory - Excel Spreadsheets for Grazing Enterprises' is a hands-on workshop targeted at landholders, managers, staff and contractors working with grazing businesses.

There are numerous reasons why people have attended the workshops but generally the overall reason is to gain an improved confidence in using Excel. Participants want to gain an improved confidence in using Excel to help with day-to-day tasks.

Microsoft Excel is a powerful spreadsheet software program developed by Microsoft for Windows, macOS, Android, iOS and iPadOS. It offers data visualization and analysis tools, the ability to easily create spreadsheets and enables the use of modern formulas to perform calculations.

What is the workshop about?

The workshops use a hands-on learning approach with a focus on improving the confidence of livestock producers in using Excel within their business. Participants receive one-on-one support and templates specifically designed for grazing businesses so they can confidently use Excel in their livestock operation. The workshop format uses relevant grazing business examples for the participants to work through, with familiar terms and context the audience can relate to. This workshop was originally developed by Bush Agribusiness and was acquired by ConnectAg in 2018. The workshop also features a range of free decision support tools participants can use, as well as a list of useful Excel contacts and resources.



The ¾ day workshop enables livestock producers to attend and still have time to do other high priority jobs at home in the afternoon.

The Farm Business Resilience Program is jointly funded through the Australian Government's Future Drought Fund and the Queensland Government's Drought and Climate Adaptation Program.

Benefits in Attending - Better Decision Making Through Better Record Keeping

Feedback from participants has always been positive, with satisfaction ratings above 7 out of 10 for all 177 participants over 23 workshops since 2018.

Better record keeping has consistently been the most common planned change by participants. They also believed they had more information to make better management decisions gained through understanding spreadsheets which would result in better business decisions. Others believed they had better control and understanding of their business data and could better use this data for decision making.

Other benefits go beyond the farm gate with better record keeping through Excel which will enable information to be more easily forwarded to business advisors such as accountants.

Carmel Beresford and her family own and operate a grazing enterprise near Eulo in western Queensland. Following the Excel workshop Carmel commented

“Today I learnt many things about of the capabilities of Excel. I’ve been using Excel for the better part of 20 years and used very little of what is available in it. I hope now to use much more.”

Carmel mostly uses Excel for the business administrative purposes and bookkeeping.

“What I found most valuable was learning how to link figures between different worksheets” she said. “It was a very helpful day in upskilling in Excel”.

Debbie Arnold and her husband Gary manage Goodar Station near Goondiwindi for the Cunningham Cattle Company. Debbie said she had used Excel spreadsheets regularly to calculate gross margins, log staff timesheets, recording and stocktaking company work horses and their rider ability, recording company assets and workplace health and safety. However, her capabilities were limited and she lacked the skills to develop her own spreadsheets as she had only ever worked with documents already set up and ready to complete.

“Now I can use formulas and create more advanced spreadsheets. The training was also really helpful for being able to read and comprehend spreadsheets – particularly ones sent through by company management.”

“The biggest challenge for us was corporate management and the subsequent requirement to do gross margins. Now we have the experience and training to do this confidently.”

Upskilling in using Excel has also had a flow on affect to other staff working with Debbie and Gary.

“Now we can give the younger, less experienced staff a head start with using Excel and spreadsheets required by the company” Debbie said.

Debbie added:

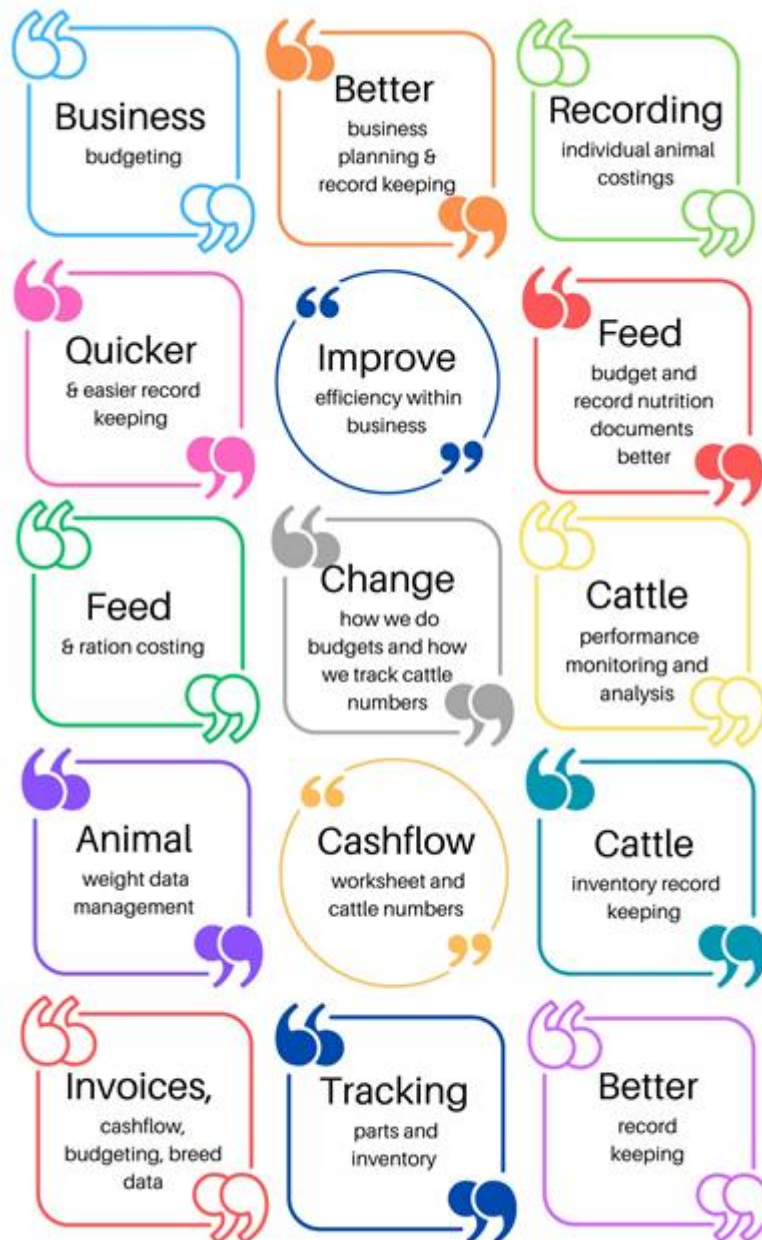
“we also use Excel for our personal budgeting, horse schedules, animal health and husbandry schedules.

But you have to use it regularly to stay across the program”. “Often people don’t utilise Excel as well as they could, and the younger people use it often at high school but then forget how once they leave school.”

One grazier said he will use this new knowledge to improve business record keeping and ability to analyse data to improve overall business performance.

Another participant said he would use his newly acquired knowledge and skills from the workshop for business resilience planning.

Other planned changes to business as a result of attending the workshop as quoted by participants included:



Value to the Businesses

At several of the workshop's participants were asked to estimate the value of this event to their enterprise over the next few years. Seventy-five per cent said they thought the workshop was worth \$5000 or more while 43 per cent estimated the workshop to be worth more than \$6000.

Enhancing producer business resilience

The planned changes identified by participants shows there is a considerable benefit to their businesses once they have gained a greater knowledge of how to use Excel and its capabilities. Gaining skills in the use of Excel opens the door for whole-of-business services to producers. This includes recording keeping and data assessment, assisting with individual enterprise management and planning, as well as whole of business planning, identifying key business risks such as drought and other business challenges such as:

- assessment-analysis of livestock operations
- business planning
- identification of expenditure across enterprises during dry seasons and drought, enabling the development of strategies to prepare for, manage and recover from drought in the future.

These workshops have given participants the capacity to perform basic, whole-of-business data capture and analysis which can provide fundamental detail and information for individual enterprise tracking and identification of business risks and profitability issues.

There have been direct enquiries received from towns outside the GrazingFutures project area because of the workshops, particularly in the Western downs and Goondiwindi areas, however ConnectAg has also received enquiries from North Queensland through to New South Wales.

Other comments/observations.

Some participants have completed the workshop several times as a means of building on what they learned in the previous workshop. Many who had attended the workshops said it was hard to maintain the knowledge if they didn't use it regularly. Excel also upgrades every few years which can create uncertainty and confusion as each upgrade brings new capabilities and generally a different appearance. Being able to attend the workshops has assisted some people to overcome this problem.

Confidence in using the program to support businesses in their planning and decision making is a game changer for many business owners and managers. Excel is a versatile tool and investment in training has clear value for industry in effective adoption of technology on farm.

Created by: Gina Mace, ConnectAg, on behalf of GrazingFutures Livestock Business Resilience.

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