

## Better Oilseeds: getting the message out

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### ABSTRACT

The Better Oilseeds project began in July 2006 and is funded by the GRDC and Australian Oilseeds Federation until June 2010. It uses a multi-pronged approach for extension of oilseed information for advisors and growers across Australia. The project has improved the knowledge and skills of advisors and growers and increased the confidence in growing oilseed crops. The project aims to ensure a skilled industry is in place able to take advantage of more favourable seasons when they return while adapting to the current seasons and retaining oilseeds in the rotation. It also aims to improve management to allow growers to achieve potential yields while managing risk.

**Key words:** canola-extension-industry-support

### INTRODUCTION

The Better Oilseeds project was borne from an urgent and critical need to lift the productivity of oilseed crops, principally the critical mass and consistency of production. The decline in oilseed production has been in part due to the lack of agronomic support with growers consequently not achieving economic potential from the crop. Another issue for canola growers in particular was the perception of risk associated with growing the crop, particularly following a number of consecutive poor seasons. The lack of grower confidence has also been a result of the lack of focus on oilseeds crops and the subsequent loss of knowledge in relation to best practices compared to other crops.

The areas of focus of the Better Oilseeds project were related to:

- Grower support/capability to achieve high quality and stable and increased production.
- Improving product quality.
- Developing/enhancing networks and extension support for oilseeds.

The project has aimed to expand the production of Australian oilseeds of high grain quality through improved grower support to achieve increased yields and expanded production area of oilseeds with high grain quality.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

This project was designed by a working group with input from the AOF, GRDC, CAA, Oilseeds WA, Soybean Associations, Australian Sunflower Association and NSW-DPI. Through these groups there has been advice from public agencies, private industry and growers.

The project has included activities to:

- Create increased awareness about the potential and value of oilseeds.
- Encourage the adoption of best practices.
- Provide the motivation for growers and extension providers to put oilseeds as a crop of choice.

For each oilseed crop (canola, soybean and sunflower), an advisory group was developed, with members in each major oilseed-growing state. Some of the outputs of the project included:

- A review of all GRDC and AOF oilseed agronomy project outcomes.
- Survey of oilseed growers to determine why they grow oilseeds and what needs to be done to increase their area of production.
- Production of an 'agronomy resource centre' website under the AOF website for oilseed agronomy related information for best management.

- Trial and demonstration sites for practical oilseed extension working with farming systems groups and consultants/extension agronomists upon advice of advisory groups.
- Field days associated with trial and demonstration sites.
- Grower case studies to 'raise the bar' in agronomic management.
- Provision of information on new products, including GM canola, hybrids, juncea canola, specialty canola, canola hay and dual purpose canola (grain/grazing).
- Agronomic training of agronomists and growers.
- Communication of issues and research findings through media releases, booklets, feature articles and other media e.g. GRDC Updates, field days, radio interviews etc.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The project has provided a multi pronged approach for extending information and providing new information to growers and agronomists for the three oilseeds crops. These include:

### **Research review and survey:**

An audit of all available GRDC-funded projects into oilseeds was completed at the commencement of the project, complemented by a review of all extension materials for canola and soybeans as part of a separate Oilseeds IDO (Victoria and S. NSW) project.

The survey to determine what growers require to sow more canola was undertaken by Inshgtrix in 2006 for the project and results were presented at the 15<sup>th</sup> ARAB in 2007. For details of the canola survey, see

[www.australianoilseeds.com/ data/assets/pdf file/0014/3137/Better Canola grower survey.pdf](http://www.australianoilseeds.com/data/assets/pdf_file/0014/3137/Better_Canola_grower_survey.pdf). The survey will be repeated in 2010 to evaluate the project's success in practice change by growers and to determine needs for future extension in break crops.

### **Website:**

The Better Oilseeds project has been successful in capturing existing knowledge of canola, sunflower and soybean agronomy and placing relevant information on the AOF's "Agronomy Resource Centre" website, which is continually being built upon. This has allowed advisors, growers and researchers to find previously difficult to access information from research as well as current extension publications. It currently contains over 750 files, including past proceedings from ARAB conferences. Files are searchable by region and topic. See: [www.australianoilseeds.com/agronomy\\_centre/agronomy\\_resource\\_centre](http://www.australianoilseeds.com/agronomy_centre/agronomy_resource_centre).

### **Trial/demonstration sites and field days / forums:**

Field trials, and to a lesser extent, demonstration sites, have been the backbone of the project. These have provided the opportunity for growers and advisors to see first-hand the effect of different management practices of oilseeds and have been the backdrop to field days through farming systems groups and provided many opportunities for media coverage.

Thirty-six trial and demonstration sites have been completed in a number of regions in WA, SA, Victoria, NSW and QLD for the three crops since the project began, with more canola trials currently underway this year addressing pertinent issues. Ideas for trials and demonstrations have been developed by the advisory groups. Field days have been hosted at each trial/demonstration site in conjunction with farming system groups with leading oilseed presenters as suggested by the advisory groups.

The canola hay trial in Victoria in 2007 has kept canola in the rotation for an extra season, by giving growers confidence that there is a cost-effective option should the season fail. The weed management demonstration including GM canola in Victoria in 2008 allowed many people to see the efficacy of the different herbicides on weed control as well as view the new GM canola varieties available in Victoria and NSW. The information was widely published and received a great deal of media attention. An irrigated trial in northern Victoria in 2008 has also supported other data at the site which suggests that the rule of thumb for canola's nitrogen requirements is overestimated for that environment, providing waterlogging is not an issue. Nitrogen fertiliser is usually the single biggest cost for canola crops. Trials in NSW and SA on sowing rates, row spacings, seed source have provided new information to the industry. The seed source trials are particularly pertinent as the number of growers using farmer-retained

seed has increased in recent years, including those retained seeds from hybrid crops. The results have shown that many growers may be limiting their yield potential by this practice and the information is currently being released. Similarly, information on sowing rates for different varieties and hybrids in different environments and the interaction with row spacing has been timely as many growers have reduced sowing rates as they adopt hybrids in order to reduce variable costs, but are finding poor crop establishment when conditions have been sub-optimal. A survey on blackleg levels in SA crops has also revealed important information where close rotations have led to increased blackleg pressure in parts of the state.

#### **Trial results booklets**

5000 copies of a booklet with results from 2007 demonstration trials were produced for canola, and a new booklet with results from 2008 is in press. A similar booklet for sunflowers has been published, and one for soybeans is underway. The booklets have been distributed widely through industry and a re-print will occur for the first canola booklets due to popular demand. It can be viewed at:

[www.grdc.com.au/uploads/documents/Raising%20the%20Bar%20with%20Better%20Canola%20Agronomy%20Part%201.pdf](http://www.grdc.com.au/uploads/documents/Raising%20the%20Bar%20with%20Better%20Canola%20Agronomy%20Part%201.pdf)

#### **Grower case studies:**

Case studies of successful growers across the different regions have been undertaken by agronomic consultants for all three crops and included in the trials and demonstration results booklets in 2008 and 2009, with the aim of promoting best practice for oilseed production. For 2009, the theme is successful crop establishment. Case studies have also been used widely in farming magazines and industry newsletters and tied into media releases when specific messages are provided.

The case studies use existing knowledge from key oilseed growers to encourage best practice and to manage the perception of risk associated with growing canola in the medium and low rainfall zones. For canola, factors to manage the risk have been presented in booklets and the media through the project (e.g. subsoil moisture at sowing, cost management, price, hay production etc.). Examples of best practice for optimal crop establishment in a range of environments are provided and have been appreciated by growers within their region.

#### **New products:**

New products such as juncea canola, canola hay, hybrids, grazing canola, Roundup Ready and high stability canola have been promoted via posters, booklets, field days, cropping expos and GRDC Updates. The 2009 Better Oilseeds booklet "GM canola – performance and experiences in 2008" has received widespread attention and positive feedback. Visit: [www.grdc.com.au/uploads/documents/GM%20Canola%20Roundup%20Ready.pdf](http://www.grdc.com.au/uploads/documents/GM%20Canola%20Roundup%20Ready.pdf). Advisors appreciated the opportunity to view independent data and read feedback from growers who tried the technology for the first time following the lifting of the moratoria in Victoria and NSW.

Information about a range of new products for canola has also been provided through extension activities and the trials/demonstrations, including optimal varieties and time of cutting for hay production, to support the industry adopt new technologies as well as increase grow confidence in canola when it provides an alternative income if the crop fails.

#### **Agronomic training:**

Canola training days for canola advisors were undertaken in Perth, Wagga Wagga and Cummins (SA). In September 2009 Victoria will host its training workshop at Lake Bolac. A number of soybean training workshops for growers and advisors have been undertaken with support from the Better Oilseeds project.

Training of agronomists has been an important part of the project, as newer agronomists may have limited background in canola as well as the fact that the industry is evolving rapidly. Feedback from training days in Wagga Wagga and Perth have been very positive overall with an average rating of 8/10 and each participant naming at least three pieces of information that they would use with their clients.

**Communication:**

This part of the project has been important as the media is the main source of information for growers and advisors, as found in a recent GRDC review (2008) and the Better Oilseeds survey (2006).

At least 150 articles have been published in the media through the project. These have included farming magazine articles, rural newspapers and other newsletters. Journalists have been contracted to write articles with ideas from the advisory groups of project coordinators, in addition to the oilseeds IDO, project coordinators and others involved in the project. Further, the trials and field days have created a great deal of media interest in the rural press.

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