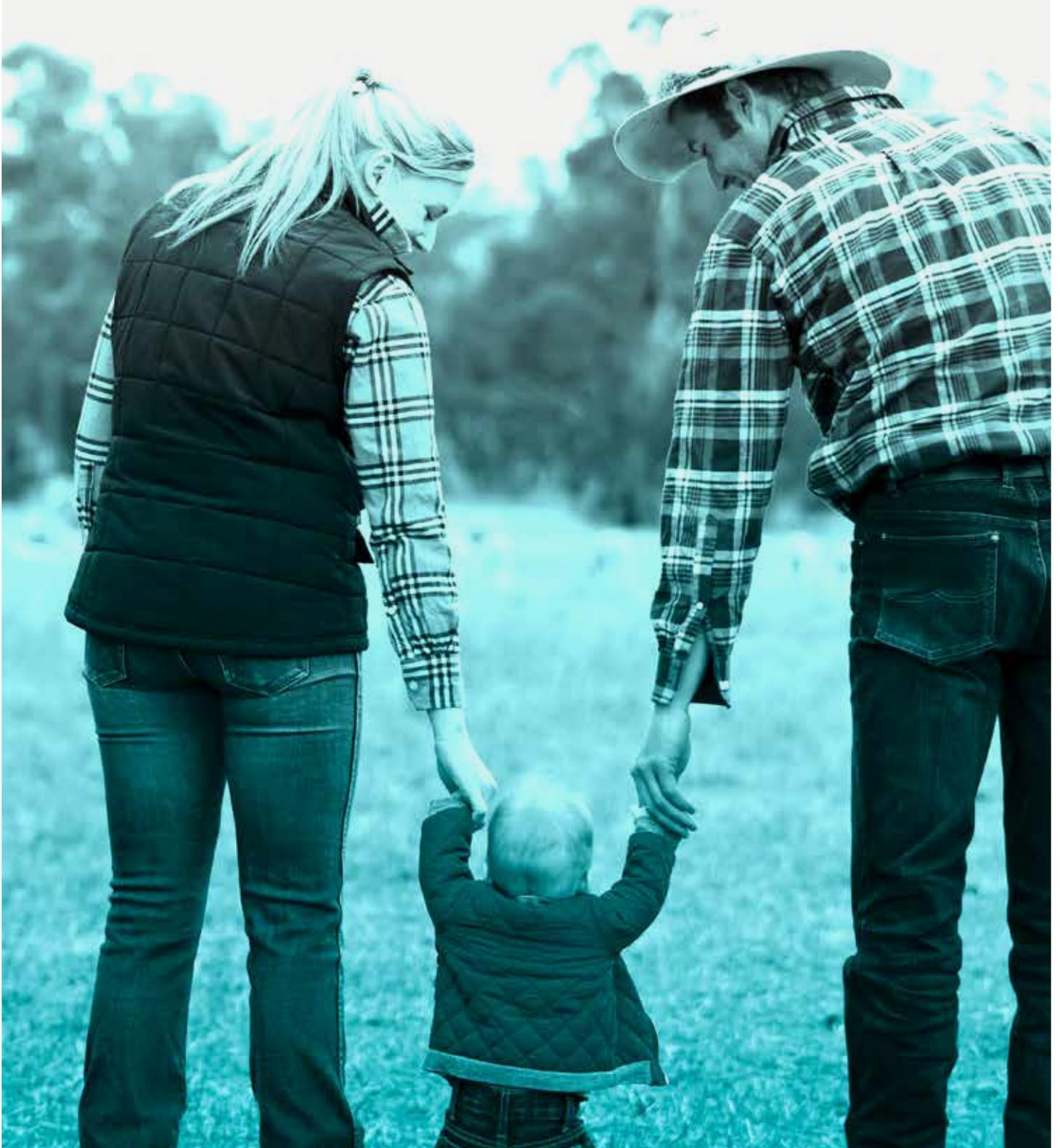


# YOUNG FARMERS

MINISTERIAL ADVISORY COUNCIL

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*Recommendations Report*





**Young Farmers Ministerial Advisory Council Members:**

Caitlin Scholfield (Chair), Business Manager, Geoffrey Gardiner Dairy Foundation, Melbourne.

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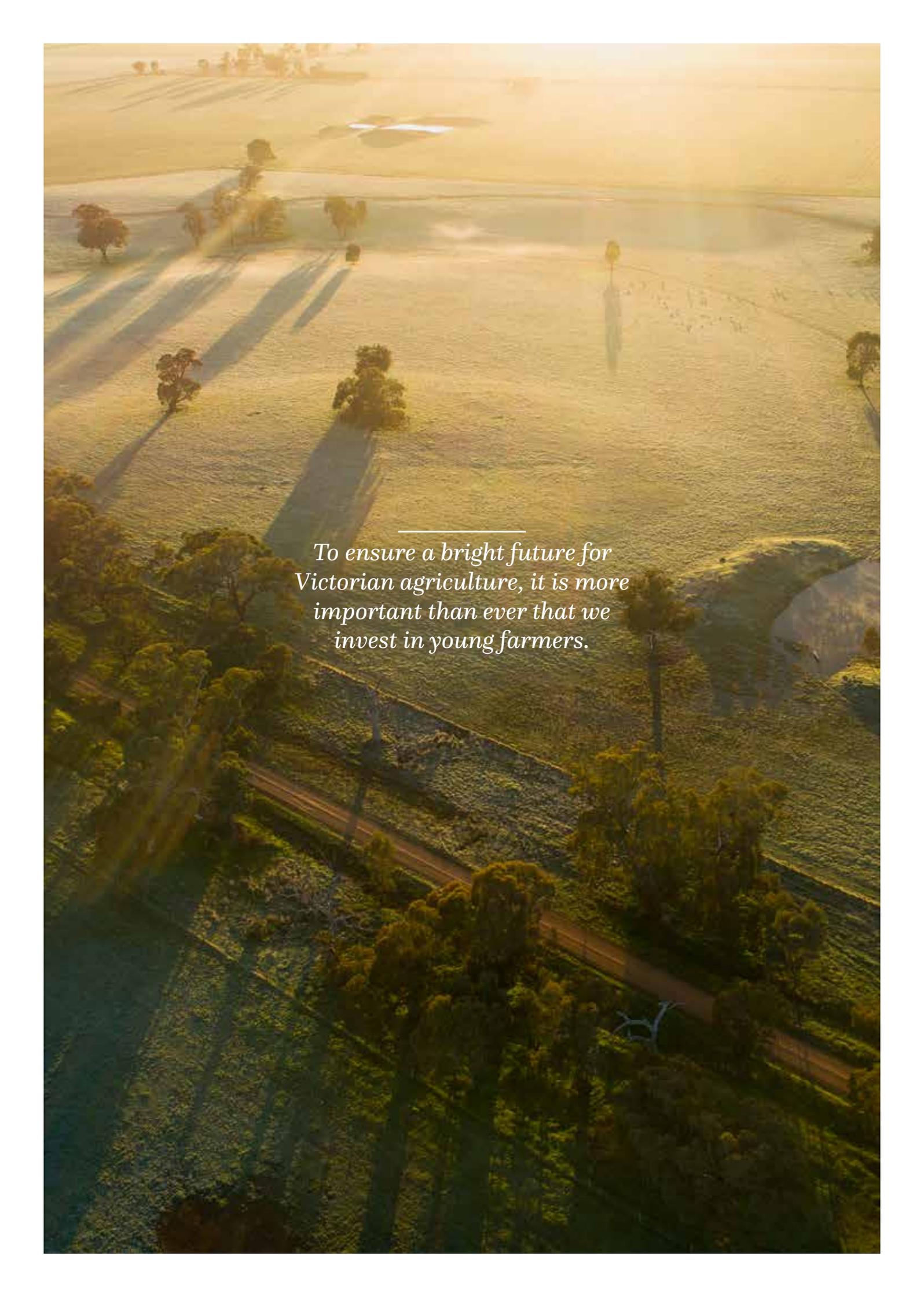
Leila Sweeny McDougall, Farm Manager, Fashion Designer and Secondary School Teacher, Tatyoon.

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An aerial photograph of a rural landscape during the golden hour. The scene is bathed in warm, low-angle light, creating long, dark shadows of trees and structures across the fields. The terrain is a mix of green pastures and brownish-yellow fields, with scattered trees and a few small ponds. The overall mood is serene and peaceful.

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*To ensure a bright future for  
Victorian agriculture, it is more  
important than ever that we  
invest in young farmers.*

## CHAIR'S FOREWORD

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*Our vision is that young farmers in Victoria are informed, enabled and engaged.*

The average farmer of the future is likely to be younger and managing farm businesses that are larger, more diverse and increasingly complex. To ensure a bright future for Victorian agriculture, it is more important than ever that we invest in young farmers.

We all know young farmers who are moving into management roles. Many have the technical and scientific skills from tertiary studies but struggle with running a business. Our consultation revealed that many young farmers are seeking further training to improve their business management skills. Investment is needed in farm business management training to ensure young farmers are **informed**.

When young farmers begin working on farm, they need practical skills for day-to-day operations such as welding, wool classing, or using a chainsaw. Enhancing the Victorian Government Young Farmers Scholarship Program would give young farmers access to vital training to ensure they are **enabled**.

Existing groups and networks, such as the Future Farmers Network, Young Agribusiness Professionals (YAPs), or Victorian Young Farmers, play a key role in connecting young farmers. The industry champions and leaders of tomorrow will come from these groups, and supporting them is essential for young farmers remaining connected and **engaged**.

Over the last two years we have considered research and proactively gathered feedback. We have challenged models of engaging young farmers to ensure their voices are heard. We have consulted with industry experts and ground-truthed recommendations with our peers. Along the way we received strong support for the Young Farmers Ministerial Advisory Council to be a voice for young farmers direct to the Minister.

The 11 passionate Council members were selected for their skills and the leadership roles they play in their region and industry. Each member has personally and professionally grown throughout this journey, strengthening their leadership skills through training and practice.

At the conclusion of our term, not only can we make supported recommendations to the Minister, but we leave a legacy of 11 young leaders who will go on to provide immense value to their communities and industry.



**Caitlin Scholfield**

Chair,  
Young Farmers Ministerial Advisory Council

# INTRODUCTION

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*The Victorian Government established the Young Farmers Ministerial Advisory Council (the Council) in 2015, bringing together 11 passionate young people in agriculture. The purpose of the Council is to provide advice to government about practical actions and opportunities to attract and retain young people in agriculture.*

The Council has two main roles:

- **recommendations** – to provide advice to the Minister for Agriculture on practical actions and opportunities to attract and retain young people in agriculture.
- **leadership** – to act as young leaders or ambassadors for agriculture. This includes engaging with industry and community to provide feedback on policy issues to government.

## **Priority areas for recommendations**

The Council focused on two areas that are priorities for young people in agriculture. The recommendations relate to these areas, one economic and one social:

- building farm business management capacity and financial literacy skills for the next generation of farmers.
- exploring the opportunities for young people in agriculture to network, connect, and engage with educational activities and events, and in a social capacity.

The recommendations are practical actions and opportunities to support young farmers, and include suggestions of how to achieve them.

## **Process for development**

Over the two year term, the Council has considered research and consulted broadly to develop recommendations. Demographic information and literature reviews on the two priority areas were completed to inform development of recommendations. A variety of consultation methods were used to engage with young farmers, people working in other roles in agriculture, and key stakeholders. Personal engagement and local workshops were the most valuable aspects of the Council's consultation. As a result of these processes, the recommendations are reflective of the views of young people in agriculture across Victoria.

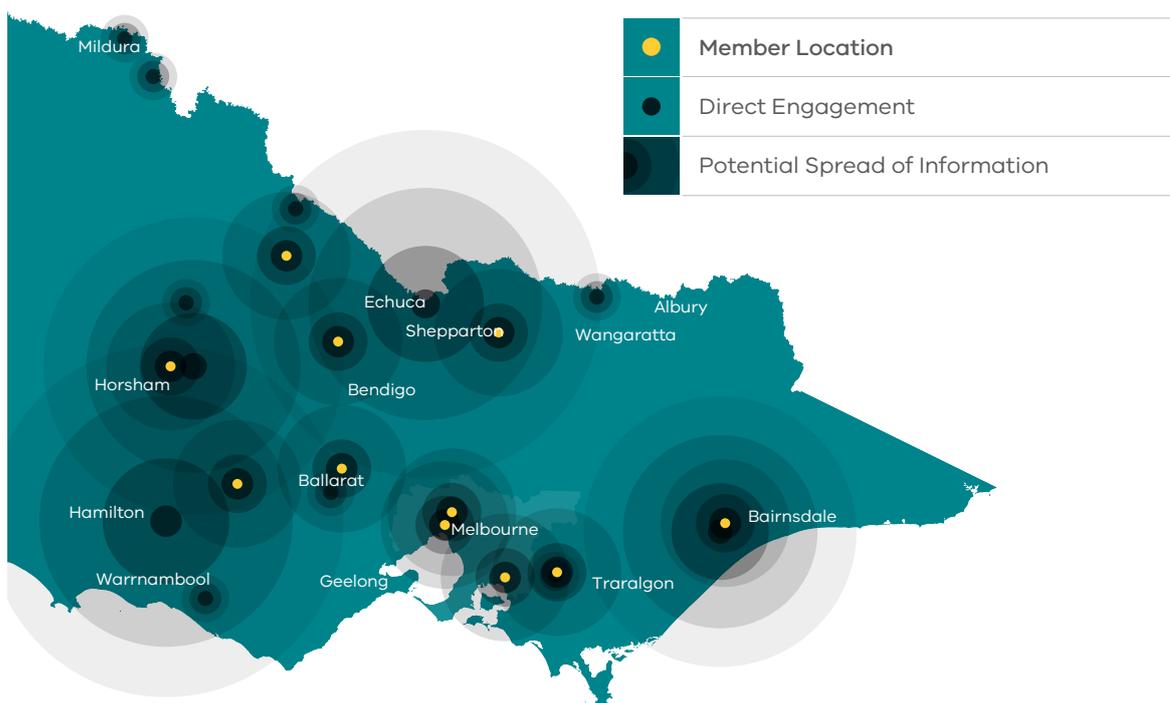
## **Young ambassadors for agriculture**

Council members have been active as young ambassadors for agriculture, practicing their leadership skills in their own communities and industries. Members have been working to attract and retain young farmers through speaking at university and school careers days, speaking at industry events, working with local groups and networks, stimulating new initiatives, and undertaking media activities to promote the profile of young people in agriculture.

## **An active role in delivery**

Council members could play an active role in delivering the recommendations, including promoting programs and working to facilitate collaboration between groups. The 11 members across the state have a great capacity to engage young farmers, industry groups and communities. Members will continue their work to inspire young people and attract new entrants to agriculture.

# COUNCIL ENGAGEMENT



## The direct engagement and potential spread of information from Council consultation.

An online engagement platform was used initially to gather ideas, and identify issues and opportunities for young people in agriculture. However the platform proved ineffective with a low response rate, and it became evident that other avenues for gathering information were needed.

Prior to drafting recommendations, each Council member gained input from at least 5-10 young farmers and 4-8 people in other roles in agriculture, through conversations or surveys.

After drafting recommendations, four workshops were held across the state with young farmers and people working in other roles in agriculture, to further develop the recommendations.

Workshops were hosted by Council members in their local areas. They were held in Lindenow, Echuca, Rupanyup, and Woodhouse. Workshops were promoted locally, and people from different industries and in different roles were invited to ensure diversity. Participants came prepared with their own ideas and were able to share them in the facilitated discussion.

Phone interviews were then conducted with a further eight young farmers from different industries and regions, to capture in depth information relating to the recommendations.

Over the two year period Council members actively engaged with many young farmers and people in their industries, communities and networks.

# OVERVIEW OF RECOMMENDATIONS

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## Ongoing Research

Develop a better understanding of the operating environment for young farmers and how they access information.

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## Scholarships

Continue to support the Victorian Government Young Farmers Scholarship Program, and increase the number of scholarships in line with demand.

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## Farm Business Management Capacity

Implement ongoing farm business management upskilling that is strategic and reviewed annually to provide targeted support.

Establish cross-industry Best Practice Farm Business Management Principles.

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## Communication

Encourage collaboration across key industry and community groups to share targeted information about programs, events and learning opportunities for young people in agriculture.

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## Groups and Networks

Utilise and support existing groups and networks, and encourage their collaboration.

Establish a grants program that is available to groups and networks that support young farmers.

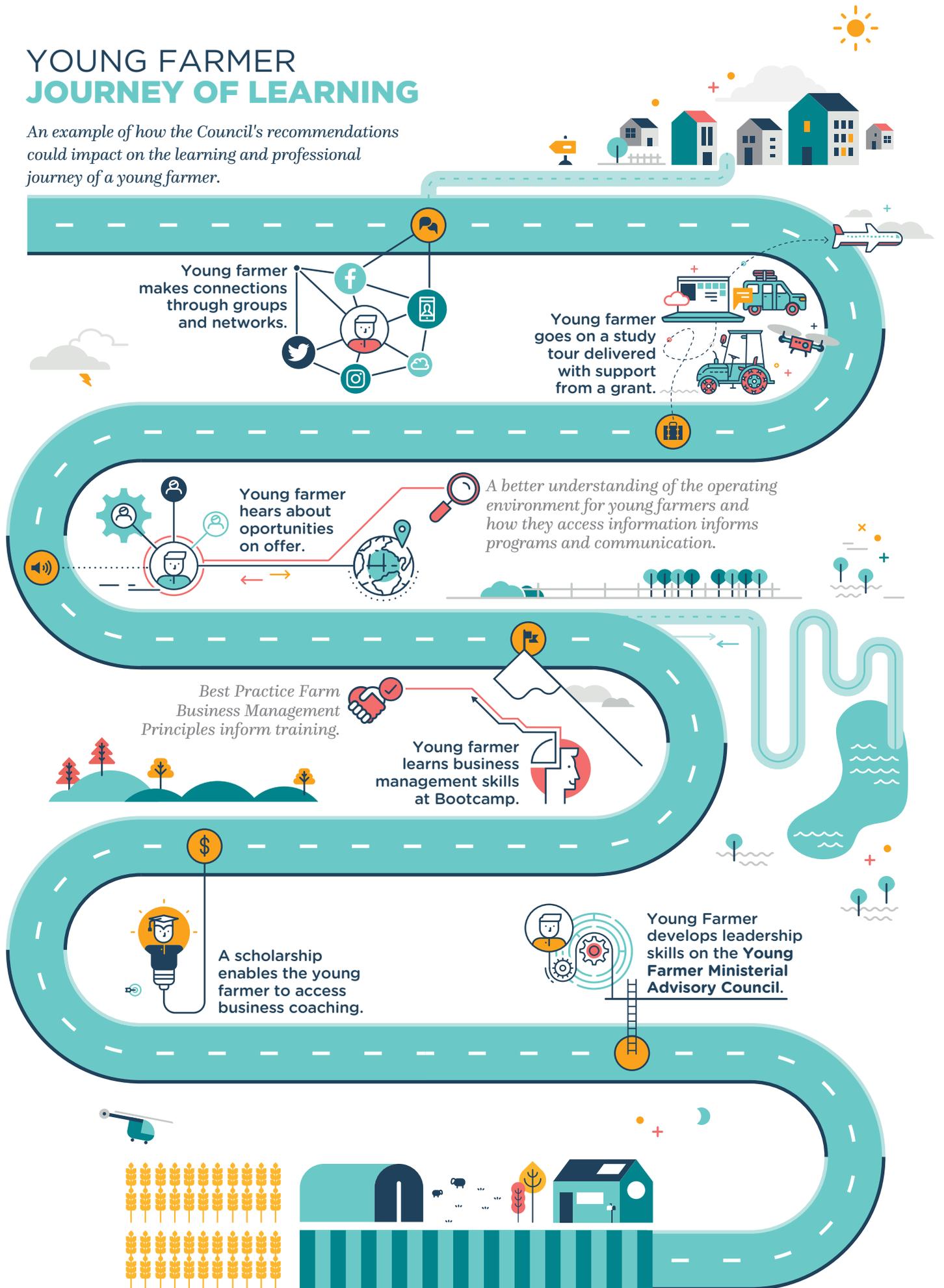
Continue the Young Farmers Ministerial Advisory Council.

## THEMES

*Throughout the development of the recommendations and consultation, three themes continually arose that relate to both priority areas: mental health, a ground-up approach, and cross-industry collaboration. These themes are detailed throughout the recommendations.*

# YOUNG FARMER JOURNEY OF LEARNING

An example of how the Council's recommendations could impact on the learning and professional journey of a young farmer.



# ONGOING RESEARCH

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***Recommendation: Develop a better understanding of the operating environment for young farmers and how they access information.***

## Issue

Consultation showed that young farmers often do not access existing opportunities. A range of complex and dynamic factors influence young farmers' decision making and participation in opportunities. Understanding the operating environment for young farmers in Victoria requires a holistic approach.

Accessing valuable and timely information is a major issue for young farmers. Channels of communication and internet and mobile coverage affect young farmers' ability to access information. There is currently a lack of research on young farmers' use of social media and online platforms (Nettle and Phillips 2017).

## The Opportunity

There is an opportunity for government to build on the Council's consultation and existing research to better understand the operating environment of young farmers and how they access information. Research should be outcome focussed and shared with industry groups to inform support for young farmers.

### **Build a holistic understanding of the operating environment of young farmers.**

Research should consider social, economic and environmental factors affecting young farmers' decision making. This may include young farmers' aspirations, needs, networks, social and economic circumstances, education, opportunities, barriers and location. Research would uncover any factors that prevent young farmers from using available resources or participating in opportunities.

### **Understand how young farmers access information and how they use social media.**

Understanding how young farmers access information will improve targeting and promotion and make better use of opportunities. More research is needed on young farmers' social media use and its role in connectedness, education, individual wellbeing, and social and professional networks (Nettle and Phillips 2017).

### **Build on existing research and consultation undertaken by the Council.**

Government could collaborate with industry groups and research organisations to find and build on existing research, and to share findings. Consultation revealed that word-of-mouth communication through farmer groups and personal networks is a trusted source of information for young farmers.

### **New approaches to research are required that are specific to young farmers.**

Consultation found that individual face-to-face communication is the best way to engage young farmers. Research methods should be designed specifically for young farmers.



# SCHOLARSHIPS

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***Recommendation: Continue to support the Victorian Government Young Farmers Scholarship Program, and increase the number of scholarships in line with demand.***

## Issue

The current Victorian Government Young Farmers Scholarship Program is a great opportunity for young farmers to study and put new skills into practice. However, consultation revealed that many young farmers are unaware of this initiative. Research also revealed that applications are often poor quality, which suggests that young farmers require more guidance during the application process.

## The Opportunity

The scholarship program is an opportunity for government to stimulate education, innovation and leadership in agriculture. A priority of the program should be building farm business management capacity.

The literature suggests that education and training provides young farmers with access to networks and encourages participation in industry activities (Nettle and Phillips 2017). Consultation revealed strong support for the scholarship concept.

### **Increase application support and make the application process a learning opportunity.**

Improved application support will lead to higher quality applications. The government should give unsuccessful applicants constructive feedback to enable them to improve future applications. The application should also detail how the applicant will share their learnings, to ensure scholarships provide maximum value to industry.

To encourage young farmers who may lack the confidence to apply for a scholarship themselves, applicants could also be nominated by a third party who provides a reference.

### **Use Young Farmer Industry Champions to promote scholarships.**

The program requires better promotion and awareness. Previous recipients could act as 'Industry Champions' to promote the program and the broader industry. This will create win-win outcomes for both government and scholarship recipients. Participation in media, promotion and evaluation is a current requirement of the scholarship.

The government could provide specific examples of how the scholarships can be used. This may include one-on-one farm business coaching or mentoring. Coaching provides an alternative or complementary learning option that may help meet farmers needs and learning preferences.

### **Increase the number of scholarships provided in line with demand.**

Greater awareness of the program will attract more applications, and increased application support will result in higher-quality applications. The number of scholarships provided should increase in line with the number of quality applications received.



## Case Study

**Lauren Peterson – Young Farmers Scholarship Recipient 2015, Boorcan**

*“The award has not only given me education to help build our business, but it’s also given me the confidence to reach out and ask questions, to seek more information, to seek other experiences and to meet people along the way. And that’s been the biggest benefit of my studies. It’s not just the actual foundation studies that I learnt through my diploma but also the opportunities I’ve had since.”*



# FARM BUSINESS MANAGEMENT CAPACITY

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***Recommendation: Implement ongoing farm business management upskilling that is strategic and reviewed annually to provide targeted support.***

## Issue

The 2015 Regional Wellbeing Survey showed that young farmers were more likely to want to expand and intensify their farm business compared to their older counterparts. Rising input prices, drought, and falling prices for goods produced are the biggest barriers to farm business development (Regional Wellbeing Survey 2015). Young farmers face greater financial volatility, and financial decision making is more complex today. Increasing young farmers' farm business management capacity will increase their resilience to these issues. While there are successful existing programs, accessibility is a key issue for young farmers.

## The Opportunity

Government has an opportunity to advance farm business management capacity of young farmers through delivering training that includes Best Practice Farm Business Management Principles. Better farm business management will result in a more profitable, resilient, environmentally responsible and safer industry.

### **Deliver three levels of farm business management training.**

The current Victorian Government Young Farmer Farm Business Bootcamp received positive feedback from participants. A similar program delivered at three levels, would better target information to meet skill needs. To reduce negative perceptions, 'beginner' training could be called 'fundamentals'.

*"I'm in a stronger position to deal with banks in order to grow, and have the tools to identify issues before they get out of hand. It has made me feel more confident about running a self sufficient small business."*

*Hamilton Bootcamp Participant*

Targeted 'Toolkits' would assist young farmers to implement learnings in their business. As an online resource that is accessible to anyone, these toolkits could include training notes and tangible steps to apply learnings in the business.

Training should provide basic to mid-level skills. The scholarship program allows young farmers needing advanced skills to access formal education or other support.

### **Ensure training is accessible for time and cash-poor young farmers.**

Training times and formats need to be flexible, with opportunity for online and evening sessions. Many young farmers were unable to attend the Bootcamps because of childcare commitments. Training should be held regularly and in different locations across Victoria.

### **Collaborate with industry groups to deliver cross-industry training, and expand on successful programs.**

Maximise the value of training programs by providing content relevant to multiple industries. Partner with industry groups and expand on successful programs, such as the NSW Young Farmer Business Project and dairy industry extension programs.

### **Content should be strategic and reviewed annually.**

Training should cater for the future needs of young farmers and include Best Practice Farm Business Management Principles. Training should also include one-on-one farm business management coaching.

Training needs to be reviewed annually to ensure it remains relevant and caters for issues that young farmers are currently managing. Include new innovations and developments in farm business management practices, and use evaluation from Bootcamps and other programs to inform content.

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***Recommendation: Establish cross-industry Best Practice Farm Business Management Principles.***

**Issue**

In a recent Canadian study, the food and beverage sector ranked not only as the highest in risk, but the lowest in readiness to manage risk (KPMG 2012). If agriculture continues to prioritise production over business management, farmers will struggle in an increasingly volatile and complex financial and economic environment (KPMG 2012).

Agriculture training often focuses on production rather than farm business management and financial literacy. The type and quality of education available for young farmers varies considerably. There is limited understanding of the best practice for effective farm business management for Victorian farmers, and therefore a limited understanding of the current skills gap for young farmers.

**The Opportunity**

There is an opportunity for government to lead establishment of cross-industry Best Practice Principles for Farm Business Management for farmers in Victoria. These could be shared with training providers to ensure young farmers are equipped with the best practices for business management.

**Identify cross-industry Best Practice Farm Business Management Principles.**

Canadian research has identified a measurable link between beneficial management practices and farm financial success (Ipsos 2015). This research identified seven farm business management practices that drive farm financial success.

Establishing similar Best Practice Principles for Victoria would:

- inform farm business management training and program design
- equip young farmers with best practices to successfully manage farm businesses
- identify skills gaps for young farmers and information shortfalls for different industries
- provide an evaluation framework for training programs.

**Collaborate with industry groups and research organisations, and build on existing research to establish Principles.**

Government could play a lead role in bringing together industry groups, research organisations and training providers to identify and establish Principles. Government should build on existing research, including the Canadian study 'Dollars and Sense: Measuring Tangible Impacts of Beneficial Business Practices on Canadian Farms' (Ipsos 2015). It is important to make the most of work already undertaken, especially in the dairy and horticulture industries.

**Train young farmers in Principles through government programs, and share information with other training providers.**

Young farmers should be trained in these Principles, equipping them with the best practices to successfully manage farming businesses. Principles should be central to government farm business management training programs. Government could support training providers by sharing Principles and offering them as flexible learning modules for use as they see fit.

*Case Study*

**Insurance as a risk management tool**

*One of the seven principles the Canadian study identified is 'Assess Risk and Manage as Part of the Business Plan'. Sarah\* manages a cropping operation in Northern Victoria and recognised that insurance was an important risk management strategy for her business. She found crop insurance difficult to navigate and discovered the products by accident. If assessing and managing risk was a Best Practice Principle, and a standard part of farm business management training, she would be better equipped to manage risk in her business, by using the most effective tools and products available.*

*\*Name changed.*

# COMMUNICATION

*“Only people who know people ‘in the know’ are aware of opportunities”*

*Andrew Cameron,  
Young Farmer, Penshurst*

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***Recommendation: Encourage collaboration across industry and community groups to share targeted information about programs, events and learning opportunities for young people in agriculture.***

## Issue

There is a need to better connect young people in agriculture and increase awareness of opportunities that would benefit them. Creating meaningful connections would help young farmers feel supported, engaged, and encouraged to participate. The 2015 Regional Wellbeing Survey found that young farm managers spent less time with family and friends and reported higher social exclusion than their older counterparts. Connecting young farmers is important for farm business performance and essential for mental health.

## The Opportunity

Government has an opportunity to encourage collaboration across industry and community groups to improve levels of engagement. This will better connect young farmers with the information and support they need.

**Encourage collaboration between groups and networks to make better use of their collective communication capacity.**

Numerous industry and advocacy groups manage member databases, such as the Future Farmers Network, Victorian Farmers Federation and Victorian Young Farmers. Successful grassroots online communities, such as AgChatOz and Young Potato People, show the potential for online communities to support young farmers' social and professional needs.

The government should encourage collaboration between groups, networks and online communities to capitalise on their collective communication capacity and distribution channels.

**Enable collaboration by hosting contact information on the Agriculture Victoria website.**

A central database of key contacts from groups and networks on the Agriculture Victoria website would assist collaboration. Government could play a key role in bringing groups and networks together. Groups would also benefit from government funding to manage their databases.

**Use existing groups and networks to distribute government communication.**

The 2017 Sensis report on social media use in Australia shows that 99 per cent of people aged 18 to 29 use social media, but only three per cent use it for engaging with government. Government should use existing groups and networks when sharing information.

**Target communication to the preferences of the audience.**

Effective communication and engagement plays a crucial role in the success of programs, events and other activities. Communication must be targeted to the needs of each audience and consider:

- industry (i.e. dairy, grains, sheep, horticulture, agribusiness banking)
- communication preferences (i.e. receiving information via text message rather than email)
- business skills (i.e. new to the industry or experienced).

# GROUPS AND NETWORKS

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***Recommendation: Utilise and support existing groups and networks, and encourage their collaboration.***

## Issue

Consultation highlighted concerns for the mental health of young farmers, especially those in isolated areas. The 2015 Regional Wellbeing Survey found that 30 per cent of young farmers reported low levels of wellbeing.

Existing groups and networks play a key role in connecting young farmers and supporting their social and learning needs. Consultation revealed a lack of coordination between groups and networks, resulting in too many events, a duplication of offerings, and difficulties for young farmers to track opportunities.

## The Opportunity

Government can improve support for young farmers by capitalising on and supporting existing groups and networks, and by encouraging their collaboration.

### **Use existing groups and networks.**

Existing groups and networks are well positioned to deliver programs for young farmers, with existing structures, memberships, reputation, and communication capacity. Many local groups play a key role in rural communities, especially by providing word-of-mouth communication.

### **Provide support to groups and networks, including hosting a calendar of events.**

Support to existing groups and networks may include coordination, funding and communications support. Government could provide support by hosting a calendar of events on the Agriculture Victoria website.

Better coordination between different events (timing, location, content, target) would increase farmer participation, reduce duplication, and make it easier for young farmers to learn about events in their area.

### **Encourage existing groups and networks to collaborate.**

Government should encourage collaboration and reduce barriers between industries and cultures. Collaborative events will attract greater numbers resulting in better social outcomes, fewer events and fewer demands on time-poor farmers.

## Case Study

### **Ecklin & District Discussion Group**

*The Ecklin & District Discussion Group involves dairy farmers and service providers and has been running for 30 years. Members meet every second month to discuss current topics, visit a farm, hear from guest speakers and enjoy a BBQ. Driven by a young leadership team, the group brings together older and younger farmers and runs occasional social events and an annual study tour.*

*The group provides a forum where members can talk about issues they are currently managing and can seek advice from others. The group provides a trusted source of information for members, as they are able to access the knowledge and experiences of other farmers.*

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***Recommendation: Establish a grants program that is available to groups and networks that support young farmers.***

### Issue

Funding to support young farmers in the past has been targeted at specific groups and networks. Consultation suggested there is now a lack of funding available to young farmers and their supportive groups and networks. This is the case at all levels: local, regional, and state.

### The Opportunity

Government can assist existing groups and networks to support young farmers through a grants program with clear guidelines. This is key to ensuring current young farmer groups and networks are supported and remain viable into the future.

#### **Provide varied levels of funding to cater for the wide variety of needs.**

Groups and networks need funding for a wide variety of projects that support young farmers. A group may want to deliver a business management workshop valued at \$5000, or run a study tour valued at \$100,000. Grants should be open to all groups who play a role in supporting young farmers, including community and sporting groups.

#### **Preference should be given to collaborative approaches.**

Grants could provide incentives for groups and networks to collaborate. Collaborative approaches could be a priority in the guidelines, and this should be broadly promoted.

#### **Ensure access to a local support person to develop applications.**

The literature shows that young farmers should be heavily involved in the design, delivery and evaluation of programs, but require external resources (Nettle and Phillips 2017). A local support person would assist with developing applications and ongoing reporting. Other grant seeking support should be used and promoted, including from The Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal. This ensures a ground-up approach to design, and which enables funding to be directed to a local level.

#### **Government could use the Council and Scholarship Program to deliver grants.**

The grants could form a second arm to the scholarship program and use the existing framework. Scholarship recipients could be used as Young Farmer Industry Champions to promote grants. The Council could play a key role in developing and delivering the grants program.

### *Case Study*

#### **NSW Young Farmers and YAPs Border Tour**

*NSW Young Farmers and YAPs (Young Agribusiness Professionals) partnered to run 'Border Tour', a study tour across Southern NSW and Northern Victoria. This was a two-day bus tour showcasing excellence in agricultural production. Participants visited a number of agricultural enterprises including horticulture, livestock and grains. The tour was targeted at young farmers, industry professionals and agriculture students, and was highly beneficial for learning and networking outcomes. Due to the success of the first tour, a second tour ran. The tour was funded through participant fees, industry sponsorship and a grant from Future Farmers Network.*



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## ***Recommendation: Continue the Young Farmers Ministerial Advisory Council.***

### **Issue**

Only five per cent of young farmers are confident they can influence state or national decision making, a much lower percentage than older farmers (Regional Wellbeing Survey 2015). Current young farmer groups in Victoria have little participation or input into policy issues.

Young people in agriculture face different challenges to older generations and view problems from different perspectives. Young people in agriculture need a separate channel of communication to government because older and more experienced voices are often heard above younger voices.

### **The Opportunity**

There is an opportunity for government to use the Council to add value to government operation, to engage and empower young farmers, and to develop future leaders. Consultation revealed strong support for the Council and its role in representing young farmers' issues and ideas. Many young farmers expressed interest in becoming involved in the future.

### **Use the Council to highlight current young farmers' issues and as a sounding board for ideas.**

Government could gain more value from the Council if it was administered in the same way as other Ministerial Advisory Councils. The Council could act to stimulate two-way communication between government and young people in agriculture. It should highlight on-ground issues as they occur, and enable young people to provide advice to government.

Government should use the Council to test ideas and gain feedback through consultation, as demonstrated over the last two years. The Council provides significant value to government through its immense capacity to engage young people in agriculture across Victoria.

### **Develop future leaders for agriculture.**

Part of the Council's role is to develop the leadership skills of members. Council members are required to act as young leaders and ambassadors for agriculture. This includes engaging with industry and community to provide feedback to government, and promoting agriculture as a career for young people.

The next term of the Council could include mentoring to develop leadership skills. Fifty per cent of current members could be retained for a second term, and could act as mentors to new appointees.



### Case Study

**Thomas McGrath, Young Farmers Ministerial Advisory Council Member, Murtoa**

*"I am happy that I was able to represent young farmers in my local area of North-West Victoria, by being on the Council. I felt I pushed for their needs including access to scholarships for training, and emphasised their views to ground-truth ideas and discussion. Involvement in the Council has allowed me to develop my leadership skills and gain real insight into policy making. Organising young farmer workshops, attending the Marcus Oldham Rural Leadership Program, and speaking in front of small groups has given me skills that hold me in good stead for future similar roles. The trust that is created through having genuine conversations with farmers about their issues motivates me to persist with advocating for and representing my industry."*



Photo: The Wimmera Mail Times

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## DEFINITIONS

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**Young farmer** - Where used in this document, the term 'young farmer' refers to someone who is an employee, manager, or owner of a farm business.

**Business coaching** - Business coaching is providing support and occasional advice to individuals or groups to help them improve the effectiveness of their business.

YOUNG  
**FARMERS**