

The learnings and challenges of running a study tour



National Vegetable
Extension Network

VICTORIA - GIPPSLAND

Introduction

Study tours can be a great networking opportunity and a very valuable method of disseminating large amounts of important information to growers however, they can also present challenges for both organisers and attendees. VegNET Gippsland, through funding from Hort Innovation, organised a study tour for Gippsland vegetable growers to attend the Gatton AgTech Showcase in Queensland during November 2023.

In addition to the AgTech Showcase as a primary drawcard, the study tour included a visit to the Brisbane Markets, along with several site visits including to a cotton/vegetable farm, an erosion project, and either a soil health company or a vegetable processing company.

AgTech has been considered a priority focus area for Gippsland growers throughout the development of VegNET Gippsland's *Regional Extension Strategy* however, due to the relatively small size of the market, Australian growers have limited access to the newest AgTech innovations. The Gatton AgTech Study Tour allowed Gippsland growers to observe advanced technologies in action within a horticulture-specific learning environment and gain key contacts across the AgTech sector.

While the study tour presented a great opportunity for participants and was considered an overall success, several key learnings and challenges arose during the organisation and delivery phases including event timing and participation, the major event structure and site/farm visits.

Timing and Participation

The timing of any event can have a significant impact on both the number of participants able to attend, and the value they receive from the event. As such, one of the key challenges during the initial planning stages of the study tour was growers' availability to leave their farm for multiple days at the beginning of the Victorian growing season. One participant noted that *"November is an extremely busy time of year for Victorian vegetable growers; this made it hard to take the full time off to get the most out of the tour."* This feedback was exemplified in two key ways. Firstly, by the reduced number of people who signed up for the study tour, with multiple growers responding to the event invitation stating that they would like to attend but that they were just too busy; and secondly, by the number of attendees who arrived a day late or left a day early, thus missing all or some of the site visits in order to minimise time away from their farms.



VegNET Gippsland Gatton AgTech Study Tour participants.

KEY MESSAGES

- VegNET Gippsland, through funding from Hort Innovation, organised a study tour for Gippsland growers to attend the Gatton AgTech Showcase in Queensland.
- A significant amount of organisation and planning is required to ensure growers get the most value from time spent away from their farms. This includes considering event timing, and the ability for farm/site tours.

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Site visit to a local food processing company.

In this instance, the timing of the study tour was influenced by the AgTech Showcase – a Queensland event – that was timed around the Queensland season. While a flexible tour design allowed participants to arrive late or leave early, the value of the study tour was impacted for many participants due to timing. Where possible, it is recommended that when planning any event, timing is given serious consideration, from the specific day of the week for short events, to seasonal timing for longer events. This will significantly reduce a major attendance barrier and allow for participants to get the most value out of any time they spend away from their farms.

Major Event

The catalyst for a study tour is often a key event that brings people and information from a wide area together in one place for educational and networking purposes. Generally, this is a recognised event that has a clearly demonstrated value and known structure. In this instance, the Gatton AgTech Showcase was held for the first time in November 2023, and as such, was somewhat of an unknown quantity to the study tour organiser and participants. The unknown scale and structure of the event impacted the planning and promotion of the study tour, particularly with respect to demonstrating the potential value of, and planning the amount of time needed, at the showcase. Feedback from study tour participants suggested that they would like to see the AgTech Showcase grow and occur yearly. Through year-on-year growth and development, this event has the potential to deliver more detailed and tailored information to a wider network of vegetable growers with a known structure and value.

Event organisers frequently use major companies or new and exciting technology and equipment as drawcards to attract visitors. While this can be useful for demonstrating value and interest to prospective attendees, it can also cause issues when these 'drawcards' are pulled from the event line-up at the last minute. Cancellation of a key AgTech company from the showcase saw multiple participants withdraw from the study tour entirely. While the sequence of events was outside of the control of key organisers (both the showcase and the study tour), it nonetheless had significant impacts. Organisationally, there were impacts on accommodation and transport bookings, while for participants there was a perceived reduction in event value.

Site/Farm Visits

Site visits to local farms are a drawcard for growers as they are interested to see what other farms look like; the equipment they are using; and to learn about their farming operations. This element of a study tour can be very difficult to organise and can cause unfavourable last-minute schedule changes. Understandably, some farming operations are unwilling to allow visitors onto their property; this can be for many reasons including biosecurity considerations, or intellectual property (IP) concerns associated with allowing competitors onto the property. Farms that do allow site visits can cancel last minute due to unpredictable variables such as weather, staffing or equipment failures. All of these factors make it difficult to organise and subsequently communicate to potential tour participants what site/farm visits are included as part of a study tour.



Participants meeting wholesalers at Brisbane Produce Markets.

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Participants learning about an erosion project at a local farm.

The desire for site visits and the challenges in organising them were succinctly communicated by one participant who stated that they “would have loved to do more farm tours but understand the challenge of farms giving access.” Another challenging element of the site visits that was noted by participants, was the time spent travelling between locations. To a certain extent this may become out of organisers’ control, particularly when last minute cancellations cause scheduled changes. Whatever the cause, travel time can have a detrimental effect on the enjoyment and productivity of a study tour and is something that needs to be considered closely during planning.

Conclusion

It was clear that a significant amount of value was realised for those who were able to attend the Gatton AgTech study tour, with 88% of attendees stating that they would likely change farm practices or advice following the study tour. One participant noted that the tour “brought together a great group of people and had a really well-focused line-up of relevant topics that showcased Australia’s agtech and new innovation into agriculture”. Further, 66% of the growers and agronomists who participated in the study tour noted that they would not have attended the Gatton AgTech Showcase had the tour not been provided, with the other 33% unsure if they would have attended without the assistance of the funded study tour. This demonstrates the significant value of the study tour in enabling growers to attend an event they otherwise may not have attended.

Next steps

It was noted by some that the study tour was a highlight and that coordinating more study tours for Gippsland growers to both Victorian and interstate events would be of benefit and well-received. There are a multitude of conferences, field days and events that occur throughout the year that could be the catalyst for future VegNET Gippsland study tours. [Email Emily](#) to sign-up for the monthly newsletter and follow ‘VegNET_Gippsland’ on Facebook and Instagram to keep up to date on all VegNET Gippsland events and information.

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