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A Case Study Investigation Of Dairy Farm Discussion Groups

Nadine Karen Murcott

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated issues relating the operation of dairy farm discussion groups by Consulting Officers (COs) of the Livestock Improvement Corporation (LIC). Understanding these issues is a precursor to a more complete evaluation of discussion groups as an extension activity. The perspectives of the CO leading the group, farmers attending the groups and farmers hosting the groups are gathered from two case-study discussion groups.

Discussion groups are shown to provide a unique source of practical information that is highly valued by the farmers. Farmers attended discussion groups to learn from the experiences of other farmers and to obtain practical farming ideas and solutions from the properties they visited. Many farmers also attended discussion groups to compare their current farming circumstances with those of other farmers in the group in order to identify strengths and weaknesses in their systems of management. The CO had an essential role as the facilitator of the discussion group and was required by farmers to distinguish between fact and farmer opinion. Socialising was seen as an important aspect of discussion groups as it encouraged the sharing and exchange of personal farming information in an environment that farmers trust.

The main issue arising from the host farmer section was the importance of communication between the host farmer and the CO prior to the discussion group meeting. Prior communication was essential to provide the group with some focus and direction during the day while ensuring the meeting had some relevance for the host farmer.

The CO section revealed the potential for the LIC to further investigate extension techniques that would lead to greater farmer participation during discussion group meeting, which would be beneficial to all parties.

Before changes are made to the existing structure and format of discussion groups a thorough understanding of their value and potential needs to be developed. This research project has helped to identify some of the potential issues that require further investigation.

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